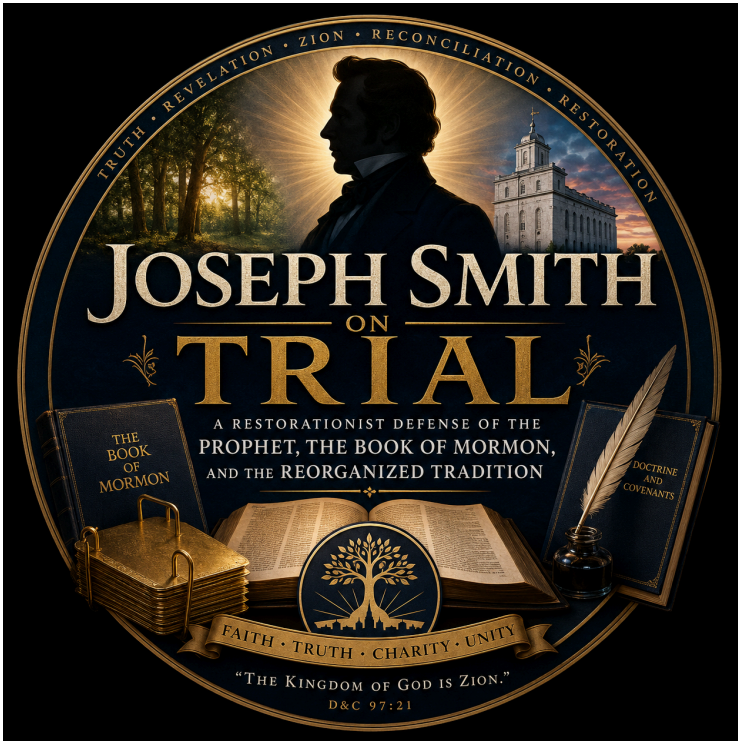
Joseph Smith Defended

A Restorationist Biography and Vindication of the Prophet

Refuting Myths, Defending the Restoration, and Reclaiming Joseph Smith from Brighamite Revisionism


TRUTH • REVELATION • ZION • RECONCILIATION • RESTORATION
JOSEPH SMITH
ON
TRIAL
A RESTORATIONIST DEFENSE OF THE
PROPHET, THE BOOK OF MORMON,
AND THE REORGANIZED TRADITION
THE BOOK OF MORMON
DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS
FAITH • TRUTH • CHARITY • UNITY
"THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS ZION."
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Joseph Smith Defended.....1
Dedication.....63
Copyright & License.....65
Preface.....67
Why Another Book on Joseph Smith?.....67
The Problem of Historical Memory.....69
The Character of Joseph Smith.....71
Joseph Smith and Polygamy.....73
Joseph Smith and Race.....74
The Book of Abraham.....76
The King Follett Discourse.....77
Why Joseph Smith Still Matters.....78
A Call for Fairness.....79
The Road Ahead.....79
Introduction.....81
The Forgotten Joseph Smith.....81
A Prophet Claimed by Many.....82
The Triumph of the Utah Narrative.....85
The Forgotten Reorganization.....86
The Creation of Myths.....88
The Problem of Anti-Mormon Literature.....90
The Problem of Devotional History.....92
Why Joseph Smith Still Provokes Strong Reactions.....93
Joseph Smith and the Restoration Ideal.....94
Recovering the Historical Joseph Smith.....96
Chapter 1.....99
The Religious World into Which Joseph Smith Was Born.....99
Early America and the Search for God.....99
A New Nation.....100
The Second Great Awakening.....102
The Burned-Over District.....104
The Smith Family.....106
Folk Christianity and Popular Religion.....108

Religious Confusion and the Search for Truth..... 110
Rationalism and Revivalism..... 111
Was Joseph Smith Simply a Product of His Time?..... 112
The Importance of Context..... 114
Chapter 2..... 117
The First Vision..... 117
The Question That Changed Everything..... 117
Religious Division and Personal Anxiety..... 118
The Influence of Scripture..... 120
The Sacred Grove..... 121
The Vision Itself..... 122
Why the First Vision Was Radical..... 124
Early Opposition..... 125
The Multiple Accounts Question..... 126
What the Variations Actually Show..... 128
Theological Significance..... 129
The RLDS Perspective..... 130
Could Joseph Smith Have Invented the Story?..... 131
The Beginning of a Prophetic Career..... 132
Chapter 3..... 135
The Book of Mormon Comes Forth..... 135
Moroni and the Golden Plates..... 135
The Night of September 21, 1823..... 136
The Hill Cumorah..... 137
The Character of Moroni..... 138
Obtaining the Plates..... 139
What Were the Plates?..... 140
The Translation Process..... 141
Emma Smith's Testimony..... 142
Martin Harris and the Lost Manuscript..... 143
Oliver Cowdery and the Completion of the Translation..... 145
The Three Witnesses..... 146
The Eight Witnesses..... 147

Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book Himself?..... 148
The RLDS Perspective on the Book of Mormon..... 149
The Publication of the Book of Mormon..... 150
Chapter 4.....153
Establishing the Church of Christ..... 153
Organization in 1830..... 153
Why Organize a Church?..... 154
The Legal Formation of the Church..... 155
The Early Membership..... 157
Early Revelations..... 158
Authority and Priesthood..... 160
Worship in the Early Church..... 161
The Role of the Book of Mormon..... 162
Opposition Begins..... 163
Was Joseph Smith Seeking Power?..... 164
The Restoration as Community..... 166
The RLDS View of the Early Church..... 167
Seeds of Future Growth..... 168
Conclusion..... 169
Chapter 5.....171
Kirtland, Missouri, and Persecution..... 171
Zion and Gathering..... 171
The Meaning of Zion..... 172
Kirtland, Ohio..... 173
Sidney Rigdon and New Leadership..... 174
Spiritual Gifts and Religious Enthusiasm..... 175
The Law of Consecration..... 177
Missouri and the Promise of Zion..... 178
Why the Saints Were Opposed..... 179
Expulsion from Jackson County..... 180
Zion's Camp..... 181
The Kirtland Temple..... 183
Financial Crisis and Internal Conflict..... 184

The Question of Persecution..... 185
Lessons from Kirtland and Missouri..... 186
The RLDS Understanding of Zion..... 187
Conclusion..... 188
Chapter 6..... 191
Nauvoo and the Final Years..... 191
The Rise of a New City..... 191
Escape from Missouri..... 192
Finding a New Home..... 193
A City Built by Faith..... 195
The Nauvoo Charter..... 196
Joseph Smith as Mayor, General, and Prophet..... 197
Religious Liberty and Political Participation..... 198
The Nauvoo Temple..... 199
Increasing Opposition..... 200
The Question of Polygamy..... 202
The Nauvoo Expositor Crisis..... 203
Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign..... 204
Arrest and Imprisonment..... 205
The Martyrdom at Carthage..... 206
What Kind of Man Died at Carthage?..... 207
The RLDS Interpretation of Joseph's Death..... 208
Conclusion..... 209
Part II..... 211
Refuting False Allegations Against Joseph Smith..... 211
Chapter 7..... 211
Was Joseph Smith a Fraud?..... 211
The Central Accusation..... 211
What Would Fraud Look Like?..... 212
The Cost of Being Joseph Smith..... 213
The Testimony of Those Who Knew Him Best..... 215
The Book of Mormon Problem..... 216
Did Joseph Smith Profit Financially?..... 218

The Human Side of Joseph Smith....219
The Evolution of Doctrine....220
Why Critics Find Fraud Appealing....222
Fraud, Delusion, or Sincerity?....223
The RLDS Perspective....224
The Test of Martyrdom....225
Conclusion....226
Chapter 8....229
Joseph Smith and Money-Digging....229
Folk Religion, Treasure Seeking, and Historical Context....229
The World of Folk Christianity....230
Treasure Seeking in Early America....231
Joseph Smith's Involvement....232
Fraud or Sincerity?....233
The Seer Stone Question....235
The 1826 Court Proceeding....236
Why Critics Emphasize Treasure Seeking....237
The Transformation of Joseph Smith....238
Folk Practices and Religious Experience....239
The Witness of Emma Smith....240
The RLDS Interpretation....241
The Problem of Presentism....242
What the Evidence Actually Shows....243
Conclusion....243
Chapter 9....247
Joseph Smith and Criminal Allegations....247
Court Cases, Arrests, and the Question of Guilt....247
Why Joseph Smith Appeared in Court So Often....248
The Difference Between Charges and Convictions....249
The Treasure-Seeking Case Revisited....251
Debt, Business, and Economic Disputes....252
The Kirtland Safety Society....253
Missouri and Political Prosecution....254

Habeas Corpus and Legal Protection..... 255
The Question of Treason..... 256
Joseph Smith and Violence.....257
The Nauvoo Expositor Affair.....258
Why So Many Accusations?..... 259
The Testimony of Neutral Historians..... 260
The RLDS Perspective..... 261
Was Joseph Smith Above the Law?..... 262
Conclusion.....263
Chapter 10.....265
Was Joseph Smith a Dictator?..... 265
Authority, Leadership, and the Myth of the Mormon Theocracy.... 265
Understanding Authority in the Early Restoration.....266
Joseph Smith's Growing Influence.....267
The Voluntary Nature of Membership.....268
Leadership by Revelation.....269
The Council System..... 271
Public Sustaining Votes.....272
Nauvoo and Political Power.....272
Religious Liberty in Joseph Smith's Thought..... 274
The Question of Dissent.....275
The Nauvoo Expositor Revisited..... 276
Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign.....277
Was Joseph Smith Building a Kingdom?.....278
Why the Dictator Narrative Persists.....279
The RLDS Perspective.....280
Authority Versus Authoritarianism..... 281
Conclusion.....282
Part III.....284
Joseph Smith and the Question of Polygamy.....284
Chapter 11.....284
The Origins of the Polygamy Controversy.....284
The Most Contested Question in Restoration History.....284

Why the Issue Matters So Much..... 285
Public Teachings Against Polygamy..... 286
Early Rumors and Accusations..... 287
The Problem of Late Testimony..... 288
Brigham Young and Public Polygamy..... 290
The RLDS Position..... 291
Emma Smith's Testimony..... 292
Joseph Smith III and the Reorganization..... 293
The Question of Secret Teachings..... 294
Historical Method and Fairness..... 295
Why the Debate Continues..... 296
The Character Question..... 297
Conclusion..... 298
Chapter 12..... 300
The Reorganization's Rejection of Polygamy..... 300
Joseph Smith III, the RLDS Church, and the Defense of the Prophet..... 300
The Position of Emma Smith..... 301
The Rise of Joseph Smith III..... 303
The RLDS Historical Project..... 304
The Public Record..... 305
The Problem of Retrospective Testimony..... 306
The Influence of Brigham Young..... 307
The Character Argument..... 308
Debates Between RLDS and Utah Defenders..... 309
Joseph Smith III's Personal Conviction..... 310
The Strengths of the RLDS Case..... 311
The Weaknesses of the RLDS Case..... 312
A Restorationist Approach..... 313
Why This Matters Today..... 313
Conclusion..... 314
Chapter 13..... 316
Evidence Against Joseph Smith's Practice of Polygamy..... 316
Documents, Testimonies, and Historical Challenges..... 316

The Burden of Proof....317
Contemporary Evidence Versus Later Evidence....318
Emma Smith's Continuing Testimony....319
The Problem of Affidavits....321
Public Denials by Joseph Smith....322
The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants....323
The Nauvoo Expositor Question....324
The Absence of Children Argument....325
The Character of Joseph Smith....326
Could Later Developments Influence Memory?....327
What Modern Historians Say....328
A Restorationist Reading....329
The Limits of Historical Certainty....329
Why the RLDS Defense Endures....330
Conclusion....331
Chapter 14....334
The Rise of Brighamite Polygamy....334
Brigham Young, Utah, and the Transformation of Mormonism 334
The Succession Crisis Revisited....335
The Westward Migration....336
Public Announcement of Polygamy....337
The RLDS Argument....338
Utah Mormonism as a Distinct Development....339
The Social Effects of Plural Marriage....340
Brigham Young's Defense of Polygamy....341
The Question of Motivation....342
Federal Opposition....343
The Manifesto and the End of Official Polygamy....344
Was Utah Mormonism a Different Religion?....345
A Restorationist Critique of Brigham Young....347
The Legacy of the Debate....348
What Can Be Said with Confidence?....349
Conclusion....349

Chapter 15.....352
The Succession Crisis of 1844..... 352
Who Should Lead the Church?..... 352
The Unexpected Nature of the Crisis..... 353
Sidney Rigdon's Claim..... 354
The Claim of the Twelve..... 356
James Strang and Alternative Claims..... 357
The Position of the Smith Family..... 358
Did Joseph Smith Designate a Successor?..... 359
The Doctrine of Lineal Succession..... 360
Joseph Smith III's Reluctance..... 361
The Reorganization of 1860..... 362
The RLDS Critique of Brigham Young..... 362
Why Brigham Young Succeeded..... 363
Competing Visions of the Restoration..... 364
What History Can and Cannot Prove..... 365
The Restoration Beyond the Crisis..... 366
Conclusion..... 367
Chapter 16.....368
Joseph Smith III and the Reorganization..... 368
The Restoration Reborn..... 368
Growing Up in the Shadow of a Prophet..... 369
The Trauma of Carthage..... 370
Emma Smith's Influence..... 371
Years of Waiting..... 372
Acceptance of Leadership..... 373
Defining the Reorganized Church..... 374
Defender of Joseph Smith..... 375
Missionary Expansion..... 376
A Different Vision of Zion..... 377
Continuing Revelation..... 378
Relations with Utah Mormonism..... 379
The Character of Joseph Smith III..... 380

The RLDS Understanding of Prophetic Leadership....381
Legacy and Influence....382
Strengths and Limitations....383
Conclusion....384
Chapter 17....386
Brigham Young and the Transformation of Mormonism....386
Continuity or Departure?....386
Brigham Young's Undeniable Achievements....387
The RLDS Critique Begins....388
The Problem of Polygamy....389
Adam-God Theology....391
Blood Atonement....391
Race and Priesthood....392
The Concentration of Authority....393
Temple Theology and Expansion....395
Was Brigham Young a False Prophet?....395
Continuity Through Development?....396
The RLDS Standard of Measurement....397
The Human Side of Brigham Young....398
What the Reorganization Preserved....399
Modern Perspectives....400
Conclusion....401
Chapter 18....404
Restorationism Versus Brighamism....404
Two Competing Visions of the Restoration....404
The Fundamental Question....405
Different Views of Joseph Smith....406
Scripture and Canon....407
The Nature of Zion....408
Priesthood and Leadership....409
The Question of Polygamy....410
Race and Equality....411
Theological Speculation....412

Christianity and the Restoration....413
The Legacy of Joseph Smith III....414
What the Reorganization Claimed to Preserve....414
What the Utah Church Claimed to Preserve....415
The Problem of Historical Certainty....416
A Restorationist Defense....417
The Continuing Relevance of the Debate....418
Toward the Later Teachings of Joseph Smith....418
Part V....420
The Book of Abraham, the King Follett Discourse, and Restoration Theology....420
Chapter 19....420
The Book of Abraham....420
Scripture, Controversy, and Possible Interpretations....420
The Discovery of the Papyri....421
The Traditional Understanding....422
The Missing Papyri Theory....423
The Catalyst Theory....424
Revelation Versus Translation....425
The Theological Value of the Text....426
The Historic RLDS Response....427
Abraham in Ancient Tradition....428
The Facsimiles....429
Does the Book of Abraham Disprove Joseph Smith?....430
The Restorationist Perspective....431
The Book of Abraham and Cosmic Theology....432
What Joseph Smith May Have Been Doing....433
Conclusion....434
Chapter 20....436
The King Follett Discourse....436
God, Humanity, and the Destiny of Creation....436
The Historical Context....437
The Problem of the Text....438
"God Was Once as We Are"....439

Theosis and Christian Tradition..... 440
Humanity's Divine Potential.....441
Eternal Progression.....442
Did Joseph Smith Teach Multiple Gods?..... 443
The RLDS Response..... 444
A Mystical Interpretation..... 445
The King Follett Discourse and Universal Restoration.....446
Does the Sermon Contradict Christianity?.....447
The Humanity of God and the Divinity of Humanity..... 448
Why Critics Focus on the Sermon.....449
A Restorationist Reading.....450
The Harmony of Abraham and King Follett..... 450
Conclusion.....451
Chapter 21.....453
Abraham, King Follett, and RLDS Restoration Theology.....453
Integrating Joseph Smith's Later Teachings with the Reorganized Tradition..... 453
The Difference Between Principle and System.....454
A Christ-Centered Reading..... 455
Theosis and Restoration..... 456
The Divine Image.....458
Eternal Life as Participation.....458
Creation as Ongoing.....459
Divine Relationality..... 460
The Problem of Literalism..... 461
Cosmic Restoration..... 462
The RLDS Canon and Continuing Revelation.....464
What the Reorganization Preserved..... 464
Abraham and King Follett Without Brighamite Assumptions.....465
Joseph Smith's Mature Vision..... 466
The Restoration as an Open Horizon..... 467
Conclusion.....467
Part VI.....470
Joseph Smith, Race, and the Book of Mormon.....470

Chapter 22.....470
Was Joseph Smith Racist?.....470
Race, Priesthood, and Nineteenth-Century America.....470
The America Joseph Smith Inherited.....471
Black Members in the Early Church.....472
Elijah Abel and the Priesthood.....474
Joseph Smith and Slavery.....474
The Presidential Platform.....475
Race and Religious Equality.....476
The Later Priesthood Restriction.....477
The RLDS Position on Race.....478
Problematic Statements.....479
The Difference Between Prejudice and Policy.....480
Why Critics Connect Joseph Smith to Racism.....481
The Restoration Principle.....482
A Balanced Historical Judgment.....482
The RLDS Assessment.....484
Conclusion.....484
Chapter 23.....488
Is the Book of Mormon Racist?.....488
Skin Color, Curses, and the Meaning of the Text.....488
The Purpose of the Book of Mormon.....489
Ancient Peoples, Not Modern Races.....490
The Nature of the Curse.....491
What Does "Skin" Mean?.....491
The Possibility of Cultural Markers.....492
The Book's Treatment of the Lamanites.....493
God Is No Respecter of Persons.....494
The Lamanites as Covenant Heirs.....495
The Universal Mission of Christ.....496
Joseph Smith's Interpretation.....497
The RLDS Perspective.....498
Difficult Passages Remain.....498

Racism Versus Ancient Worldviews..... 499
The Fruits of the Book.....500
A Restorationist Reading.....501
The Book's Final Vision..... 502
Conclusion.....502
Chapter 24.....504
Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Origins of Racial Restrictions.....504
Separating the Prophet from Later Developments..... 504
The Historical Record Under Joseph Smith.....505
Joseph Smith's Expanding Views.....506
The Post-Martyrdom Transition.....507
Brigham Young and Race.....508
The RLDS Interpretation.....509
The Influence of Nineteenth-Century America.....510
The Book of Mormon and Inclusion..... 511
The Problem of Retroactive Attribution.....512
The 1978 Revelation and Historical Reflection..... 513
Joseph Smith and Human Dignity.....514
The Witness of Early Restoration Practice.....514
The Reorganized Church and Racial Equality..... 515
A Fair Historical Assessment.....516
Why This Matters.....517
The Broader Pattern.....518
Toward a Final Assessment.....518
Conclusion.....519
Chapter 25.....522
Joseph Smith on Trial.....522
Weighing the Evidence and the Accusations.....522
The Problem of Historical Memory..... 523
The Fraud Accusation..... 524
The Book of Mormon.....525
The Character Question.....526
The Polygamy Question Revisited.....527

The Book of Abraham....528
The King Follett Discourse....529
Race and the Historical Record....529
The Dictator Narrative....530
The Succession Question....531
What the RLDS Tradition Preserved....531
Joseph Smith as a Religious Reformer....532
The Human Joseph Smith....533
The Fruits of the Restoration....534
A Verdict of History....535
The Restoration Beyond Polemics....536
Why Joseph Smith Still Matters....537
Conclusion....537
Chapter 26....540
The Future of the Restoration....540
Joseph Smith's Enduring Legacy....540
Beyond Defending Joseph Smith....541
The Enduring Principles of the Restoration....542
The Reorganized Contribution....543
Restoration and Christianity....544
Theosis and Human Destiny....545
Zion as a Living Ideal....546
Continuing Revelation in the Modern World....547
A Restoration for All People....548
Learning from History....549
Joseph Smith's Greatest Legacy....550
The Restoration and the Modern Seeker....551
The Reorganized Vision....552
A Final Reflection on Joseph Smith....553
The Restoration Continues....554
Final Conclusion....554
Appendix A....556
A Timeline of the Life of Joseph Smith....556

1805–1844 556
1805 556
December 23, 1805 556
1807–1815 557
Early Childhood 557
1816 558
Move to Western New York 558
1818–1819 558
Religious Confusion 558
1820 559
The First Vision 559
1823 560
September 21–22, 1823 560
1824–1826 560
Annual Visits to the Hill 560
1827 561
Marriage to Emma Hale 561
September 22, 1827 561
1828 562
The Lost Manuscript 562
1829 562
Translation Resumes 562
May 1829 563
Aaronic Priesthood 563
Later in 1829 563
Melchizedek Priesthood 563
1830 564
March 26, 1830 564
April 6, 1830 564
1831 565
Move to Ohio 565
Mission to the Lamanites 565
1832 565

First Written First Vision Account..... 565
1833.....566
Zion and Missouri Conflict..... 566
1834.....566
Zion's Camp.....566
1835.....567
Doctrine and Covenants Published.....567
1836.....567
Kirtland Temple Dedicated..... 567
1837.....568
Financial Difficulties.....568
1838.....569
Missouri War..... 569
Liberty Jail.....569
1839.....570
Release and Relocation..... 570
Founding of Nauvoo.....570
1840–1843.....570
Growth of Nauvoo.....570
Theological Development..... 571
1844.....571
Presidential Campaign.....572
King Follett Discourse.....572
June 1844.....573
Nauvoo Crisis.....573
June 27, 1844.....573
Martyrdom.....573
Summary of Joseph Smith's Life.....574
Appendix B.....576
Timeline of the Reorganized Church.....576
1844–Present..... 576
1844.....577
June 27, 1844.....577

August 1844 577
1845–1850 578
The Smith Family Remains Behind 578
1851–1859 578
Growing Calls for Reorganization 578
1860 579
April 6, 1860 579
Formal Reorganization 579
1860s 580
Early RLDS Growth 580
Defense of Joseph Smith 580
1870s 581
Missionary Expansion 581
Historical Investigations 581
1880s 582
Consolidation 582
Temple Lot Litigation Begins 582
1890 583
LDS Manifesto 583
1894 583
Temple Lot Case Decision 583
1900–1914 584
Continued Expansion 584
Leadership of Joseph Smith III 584
1914 584
Death of Joseph Smith III 584
1915–1945 585
Institutional Growth 585
Zion Reinterpreted 585
1946–1960 586
Global Mission 586
1960 587
Centennial of Reorganization 587

1966 ..... **587**
RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Section 144 587
1970s **588**
Social and Theological Change 588
1984 ..... **589**
Section 156 589
1994 ..... **589**
Independence Temple Dedicated 589
2001 ..... **590**
Name Change 590
2000s **591**
Continued Transformation 591
Restoration Branch Movement **591**
2010–Present **592**
Global Community 592
Historic RLDS Revival 592
Major RLDS Presidents **593**
1860–1914 593
1915–1946 593
1946–1958 593
1958–1978 594
1978–1996 594
1996–2005 594
2005–2016 594
2016–Present 594
Key Themes of RLDS History **595**
Summary **595**
Appendix C **598**
Major Arguments Against Joseph Smith and Responses **598**
A Restorationist Apologetics Handbook 598
Introduction 598
Argument 1 ..... **599**
"Joseph Smith Was a Fraud" 599

The Claim....599
Evidence Usually Cited....599
Restorationist Response....600
Summary....600
Argument 2....601
"The Book of Mormon Is a Nineteenth-Century Invention"....601
The Claim....601
Evidence Usually Cited....601
Restorationist Response....601
Summary....602
Argument 3....602
"Joseph Smith Practiced Polygamy"....602
The Claim....602
Evidence Usually Cited....602
Restorationist Response....603
Summary....603
Argument 4....603
"Joseph Smith Was Racist"....604
The Claim....604
Evidence Usually Cited....604
Restorationist Response....604
Summary....604
Argument 5....605
"The Book of Mormon Is Racist"....605
The Claim....605
Evidence Usually Cited....605
Restorationist Response....605
Summary....606
Argument 6....606
"The Book of Abraham Disproves Joseph Smith"....606
The Claim....606
Evidence Usually Cited....607
Restorationist Response....607

Summary..... 607
Argument 7..... 608
"The King Follett Discourse Is Heretical"..... 608
The Claim..... 608
Evidence Usually Cited..... 608
Restorationist Response..... 608
Summary..... 609
Argument 8..... 609
"Joseph Smith Was a Dictator"..... 609
The Claim..... 609
Evidence Usually Cited..... 609
Restorationist Response..... 610
Summary..... 610
Argument 9..... 610
"Joseph Smith Invented New Doctrine"..... 610
The Claim..... 610
Evidence Usually Cited..... 611
Restorationist Response..... 611
Summary..... 611
Argument 10..... 612
"Joseph Smith Failed as a Prophet"..... 612
The Claim..... 612
Evidence Usually Cited..... 612
Restorationist Response..... 612
Summary..... 613
Argument 11..... 613
"Brigham Young Proves Joseph Smith Taught Polygamy"..... 613
The Claim..... 613
Restorationist Response..... 613
Summary..... 614
Argument 12..... 614
"The Restoration Fragmented, Therefore It Was False"..... 614
The Claim..... 614

Restorationist Response..... 615
Summary..... 615
Argument 13..... 615
"Joseph Smith Was Just a Product of His Time"..... 615
The Claim..... 615
Restorationist Response..... 616
Summary..... 616
Final Assessment.....616
Appendix D..... 618
Joseph Smith and the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants..... 618
Continuing Revelation Through Section 144..... 618
Introduction..... 618
Part I.....619
Joseph Smith and the Foundation of Continuing Revelation..... 619
The Revolutionary Idea..... 619
Revelation and Scripture..... 620
The Early Revelations..... 621
Part II..... 621
Zion and the Kingdom of God..... 622
One of Joseph Smith's Central Themes..... 622
Early Gathering..... 622
Missouri and the Testing of Zion..... 623
RLDS Development..... 623
Part III.....624
Priesthood and Ministry..... 624
Service Rather Than Privilege..... 624
The Purpose of Priesthood..... 625
Accountability..... 625
Part IV.....626
The Mission of the Church..... 626
Why the Church Exists..... 626
Christ at the Center..... 626
The Universal Scope of Mission..... 627

Part V.....627
Stewardship and Consecration..... 627
Sacred Responsibility.....627
Consecration.....628
RLDS Interpretation.....629
Part VI.....629
Peace and Reconciliation.....629
An Increasing Emphasis.....629
The Ministry of Reconciliation..... 630
Roots in Earlier Revelation..... 630
Part VII..... 631
Section 144 and the End of the Classic RLDS Era..... 631
Historical Significance..... 631
Why Section 144 Matters.....631
A Living Tradition.....632
Major Themes of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144.....632
Continuing Revelation.....632
Jesus Christ.....633
Zion..... 633
Mission..... 633
Stewardship..... 633
Priesthood.....633
Reconciliation.....633
Hope..... 633
The RLDS Contribution to Restoration Theology..... 634
Conclusion.....634
Appendix E.....636
One Hundred Quotations of Joseph Smith..... 636
Organized by Theme..... 636
Introduction..... 636
Section I.....636
Revelation.....636
1.....637

2 637
3 637
4 637
5 637
6 637
7 637
8 638
9 638
10 638
Section II 638
Jesus Christ 638
11 638
12 638
13 639
14 639
15 639
16 639
17 639
18 639
19 639
20 640
Section III 640
Faith 640
21 640
22 640
23 640
24 640
25 641
26 641
27 641
28 641
29 641
30 641

Section IV **641**
Charity and Love 642
31 642
32 642
33 642
34 642
35 642
36 642
37 642
38 643
39 643
40 643
Section V **643**
Truth 643
41 643
42 643
43 644
44 644
45 644
46 644
47 644
48 644
49 644
50 645
Section VI **645**
Zion 645
51 645
52 645
53 645
54 645
55 646
56 646
57 646

58....646
59....646
60....646
Section VII....646
Human Destiny....647
61....647
62....647
63....647
64....647
65....647
66....647
67....647
68....648
69....648
70....648
Section VIII....648
Priesthood and Service....648
71....648
72....648
73....649
74....649
75....649
76....649
77....649
78....649
79....649
80....650
Section IX....650
Freedom....650
81....650
82....650
83....650
84....650

85....651
86....651
87....651
88....651
89....651
90....651
Section X....651
The Restoration....651
91....652
92....652
93....652
94....652
95....652
96....652
97....652
98....652
99....653
100....653
Conclusion....653
Appendix F....654
Frequently Asked Questions....654
Questions and Answers from a Restorationist Perspective....654
Introduction....654
Joseph Smith....654
1. Was Joseph Smith really a prophet?....655
Answer....655
2. Was Joseph Smith a fraud?....655
Answer....655
3. Why is Joseph Smith so controversial?....656
Answer....656
4. Why did Joseph Smith die?....657
Answer....657
The Book of Mormon....657

5. Is the Book of Mormon scripture?..... 657
Answer.....657
6. Is the Book of Mormon racist?.....658
Answer.....658
7. Why does the Book of Mormon mention skin color?..... 658
Answer.....659
8. Can archaeology prove the Book of Mormon?..... 659
Answer.....659
Polygamy..... 660
9. Did Joseph Smith practice polygamy?..... 660
Answer.....660
10. Why did Emma Smith reject polygamy?..... 661
Answer.....661
11. Why didn't Emma go west with Brigham Young?..... 661
Answer.....661
Succession.....662
12. Why didn't everyone follow Brigham Young?.....662
Answer.....662
13. Why did Joseph Smith III reject Brigham Young?..... 662
Answer.....663
Doctrine and Revelation..... 663
14. What is continuing revelation?.....663
Answer.....663
15. Why does the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants have more sections?.. 664
Answer.....664
16. Does continuing revelation replace the Bible?.....664
Answer.....664
Book of Abraham..... 664
17. What is the Book of Abraham?..... 664
Answer.....665
18. Did Joseph Smith translate Egyptian correctly?.....665
Answer.....665
19. What was the RLDS position on the Book of Abraham?.....665

Answer....665
King Follett Discourse....666
20. What is the King Follett Discourse?....666
Answer....666
21. Is the King Follett Discourse Christian?....667
Answer....667
22. What was the RLDS view of the King Follett Discourse?....667
Answer....667
Race....668
23. Was Joseph Smith racist?....668
Answer....668
24. Did Joseph Smith ban Black people from the priesthood?....668
Answer....668
25. Who was Elijah Abel?....669
Answer....669
RLDS and Community of Christ....669
26. What is the RLDS Church?....669
Answer....669
27. Is Community of Christ the same organization?....670
Answer....670
28. Why do some people distinguish between RLDS and Community of Christ?....670
Answer....670
29. What are Restoration Branches?....671
Answer....671
Zion....671
30. What is Zion?....671
Answer....671
31. Can Zion exist today?....672
Answer....672
Final Question....672
32. Why does the Restoration still matter?....672
Answer....672
Conclusion....673

Appendix G..... 676
A Restorationist Confession of Faith..... 676
A Christ-Centered Statement of Belief Rooted in Scripture, the Book of Mormon, and RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144.. 676
Preamble..... 676
Article I..... 677
God..... 677
Article II..... 678
Jesus Christ..... 678
Article III..... 679
The Holy Spirit..... 679
Article IV..... 679
Scripture..... 679
Article V..... 680
Continuing Revelation..... 680
Article VI..... 681
The Restoration..... 681
Article VII..... 681
The Church..... 681
Article VIII..... 682
Priesthood..... 682
Article IX..... 683
Human Worth..... 683
Article X..... 683
Race and Priesthood..... 683
Article XI..... 684
Marriage..... 684
Article XII..... 685
Zion..... 685
Article XIII..... 685
Stewardship..... 685
Article XIV..... 686
Peace and Reconciliation..... 686

Article XV **686**
Salvation 686
Article XVI **687**
Theosis and Divine Participation 687
Article XVII **688**
The Redemption of Creation 688
Article XVIII **688**
Resurrection 688
Article XIX **689**
Judgment 689
Article XX **690**
Hope for the Restoration of All Things 690
Article XXI **690**
The Future 690
Closing Declaration **691**
Appendix H **694**
Biographical Dictionary of Early Restoration Figures **694**
A Reference Guide to the Men and Women Who Shaped the Restoration 694
Introduction 694
A **694**
Elijah Abel (1810–1884) 695
Priesthood Holder and Missionary 695
B **695**
Brigham Young (1801–1877) 695
Leader of the Utah Movement 695
C **696**
Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850) 696
Principal Witness of the Book of Mormon 696
D **697**
David Whitmer (1805–1888) 697
Independent Witness 697
E **698**
Emma Hale Smith (1804–1879) 698

Wife of the Prophet..... 698
H..... 699
Hyrum Smith (1800–1844)..... 699
Patriarch and Martyr..... 699
J..... 699
James Jesse Strang (1813–1856)..... 699
Rival Successor Claimant..... 699
Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844)..... 700
Founder of the Restoration..... 700
Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)..... 701
President of the Reorganized Church..... 701
L..... 701
Lucy Mack Smith (1775–1856)..... 701
Mother of the Prophet..... 701
M..... 702
Martin Harris (1783–1875)..... 702
Early Supporter and Witness..... 702
O..... 702
Orson Pratt (1811–1881)..... 703
Apostle and Theologian..... 703
P..... 703
Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857)..... 703
Missionary and Author..... 703
R..... 704
Sidney Rigdon (1793–1876)..... 704
Counselor and Successor Claimant..... 704
W..... 704
Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898)..... 705
Fourth President of the Utah Church..... 705
Y..... 705
Young, Brigham (See Brigham Young)..... 705
Key Women of the Restoration..... 705
Emma Hale Smith..... 706

Lucy Mack Smith..... 706
Mary Bailey Smith..... 706
Various early female converts..... 706
Conclusion.....707
Appendix I.....708
Documentary Evidence Collection.....708
Key Historical Documents in Defense of Joseph Smith and Historic Restorationism.....708
Introduction..... 708
Document 1..... 709
The Articles and Covenants of the Church (1830).....709
Importance.....709
Restorationist Significance.....710
Document 2..... 710
The Book of Mormon (1830)..... 710
Importance.....710
Key Themes.....710
Restorationist Significance.....710
Document 3.....711
Doctrine and Covenants Section 20..... 711
Importance.....711
Key Themes.....711
Restorationist Significance.....711
Document 4..... 712
Doctrine and Covenants Marriage Statement (1835 Edition)..... 712
Importance.....712
Restorationist Significance.....712
Document 5..... 713
Joseph Smith's Public Denials of Polygamy..... 713
Importance.....713
Restorationist Significance.....713
Document 6..... 713
Emma Smith's Testimony.....713
Importance.....714

Restorationist Significance....714
Document 7....714
Joseph Smith III Interviews and Investigations....714
Importance....714
Restorationist Significance....715
Document 8....715
Testimony of Elijah Abel....715
Importance....715
Restorationist Significance....716
Document 9....716
Joseph Smith's Presidential Platform (1844)....716
Importance....716
Key Proposals....716
Restorationist Significance....716
Document 10....717
Liberty Jail Letters....717
Importance....717
Key Themes....717
Restorationist Significance....717
Document 11....717
The Nauvoo Expositor....718
Importance....718
Significance....718
Restorationist Significance....718
Document 12....718
Testimonies of the Three Witnesses....718
Witnesses....718
Importance....719
Restorationist Significance....719
Document 13....719
Testimonies of the Eight Witnesses....719
Importance....719
Restorationist Significance....719

Document 14..... 720
Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision Account..... 720
Importance..... 720
Restorationist Significance..... 720
Document 15..... 720
Joseph Smith's 1838 First Vision Narrative..... 720
Importance..... 720
Restorationist Significance..... 721
Document 16..... 721
Temple Lot Case Testimony..... 721
Importance..... 721
Topics Covered..... 721
Restorationist Significance..... 721
Document 17..... 722
RLDS General Conference Resolutions..... 722
Importance..... 722
Restorationist Significance..... 722
Document 18..... 722
RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144..... 722
Importance..... 723
Restorationist Significance..... 723
Document 19..... 723
Kirtland Temple Accounts..... 723
Importance..... 723
Restorationist Significance..... 723
Document 20..... 724
Carthage Jail Accounts..... 724
Importance..... 724
Restorationist Significance..... 724
Summary of Key Documentary Themes..... 724
Joseph Smith's Character..... 724
Monogamy..... 725
Race..... 725

Revelation....725
Scripture....725
Succession....725
Conclusion....725
Appendix J....728
Bibliography and Sources....728
Primary Sources, RLDS Sources, LDS Sources, and Modern Scholarship....728
Introduction....728
Part I....729
Primary Historical Sources....729
Joseph Smith Papers....729
History of the Church....729
Doctrine and Covenants....730
The Book of Mormon....730
The Holy Bible....730
Part II....731
Historic RLDS Sources....731
The Saints' Herald....731
The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III....731
Emma Smith Interviews....732
The Temple Lot Case Record....732
RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144....733
Part III....733
Community of Christ Sources....733
Community of Christ Official Website....733
Exploring Community of Christ....733
Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants....734
Part IV....734
LDS Sources....734
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Official Website...734
Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith....734
B. H. Roberts....735

James E. Talmage..... 735
Part V.....735
Independent Scholarship..... 736
Richard Lyman Bushman..... 736
Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling.....736
Dan Vogel..... 736
Jan Shipps.....736
Grant H. Palmer.....737
Fawn M. Brodie.....737
No Man Knows My History.....737
Part VI.....737
Book of Abraham Scholarship..... 737
John Gee.....737
Kerry Muhlestein.....738
Robert K. Ritner..... 738
Book of Abraham Essays..... 738
Part VII..... 738
Early Christianity and Theosis..... 738
Athanasius of Alexandria..... 739
On the Incarnation.....739
Irenaeus..... 739
Against Heresies.....739
Gregory of Nyssa.....739
Maximus the Confessor.....739
Origen.....739
Part VIII.....740
Universal Reconciliation and Cosmic Restoration.....740
Gregory of Nyssa.....740
Origen.....740
Modern Studies of Christian Universalism..... 740
Part IX.....740
Restoration Branch Sources..... 741
Recommended Reading Path..... 741

1. Bible..... 741
2. Book of Mormon..... 741
3. Doctrine and Covenants..... 741
4. Joseph Smith Papers..... 741
5. Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling..... 742
6. RLDS historical materials..... 742
7. Temple Lot records..... 742
8. Early Christian writings on theosis..... 742
Final Reflection..... 742
Appendix K..... 744
Glossary of Restoration Terms..... 744
A Dictionary of Key Concepts, Offices, and Doctrines..... 744
Introduction..... 744
A..... 744
Aaronic Priesthood..... 745
Agency..... 745
Apostle..... 745
Apostasy..... 746
B..... 746
Baptism..... 746
Bishop..... 747
Book of Mormon..... 747
C..... 747
Calling..... 747
Canon..... 748
Christ..... 748
Consecration..... 748
Covenant..... 748
D..... 749
Deacon..... 749
Doctrine and Covenants..... 749
E..... 749
Elder..... 750

Endowment....750
Evangelist....750
F....750
Faith....751
First Presidency....751
First Vision....751
G....751
Gathering....751
Gifts of the Spirit....752
Great Apostasy....752
H....752
High Priest....752
Holy Spirit....753
I....753
Independence....753
Israel....753
J....754
Judgment....754
K....754
Kingdom of God....754
King Follett Discourse....754
L....755
Lamanites....755
Liberty Jail....755
M....756
Melchizedek Priesthood....756
Mission....756
Moroni....756
N....757
Nauvoo....757
O....757
Ordinance....757
P....758

Patriarch....758
Priest....758
Priesthood....758
Prophet....759
Q....759
Quorum....759
R....759
Reconciliation....759
Redemption....760
Restoration....760
Revelation....760
S....760
Sacrament....761
Seventy....761
Stewardship....761
T....761
Temple....761
Theosis....762
U....762
Universal Reconciliation....762
V....763
Vision....763
W....763
Witness....763
Z....764
Zion....764
Concluding Definition....764
Restorationist....764
Appendix L....766
The Restorationist Manifesto....766
A Declaration for the Future of the Restoration....766
Introduction....766
I....767

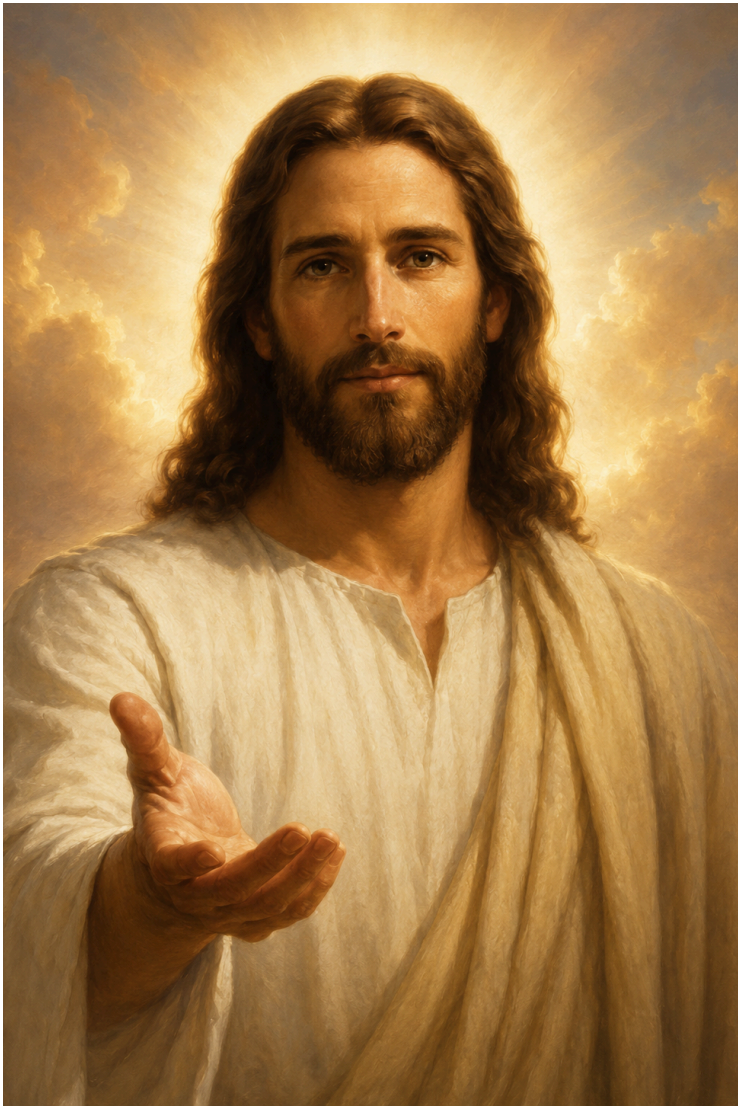
We Affirm Jesus Christ..... 767
II.....768
We Affirm Continuing Revelation..... 768
III..... 769
We Affirm the Restoration..... 769
IV.....770
We Reject the Cult of Personality..... 770
V..... 771
We Affirm the Book of Mormon.....771
VI.....772
We Reject Racism.....772
VII.....773
We Reject Polygamy..... 773
VIII..... 773
We Affirm Zion..... 773
IX.....774
We Affirm Stewardship.....774
X..... 775
We Affirm Peace..... 775
XI.....776
We Affirm Religious Freedom..... 776
XII..... 776
We Affirm the Sacred Search for Truth.....776
XIII..... 777
We Affirm the Divine Destiny of Humanity..... 777
XIV.....778
We Affirm Hope.....778
XV..... 779
We Look Toward the Restoration of All Things..... 779
Final Declaration..... 780
End of Volume.....781
Sources and References.....784
For Joseph Smith on Trial: A Restorationist Defense of the Prophet, the Book of Mormon, and the Reorganized Tradition.....784

Introduction..... 784
Part I..... 784
Primary Sources..... 785
Scriptures..... 785
Holy Bible..... 785
Book of Mormon..... 785
Doctrine and Covenants..... 786
Joseph Smith Primary Documents..... 786
The Joseph Smith Papers Project..... 786
History of the Church..... 787
Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith..... 787
The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith..... 787
Part II..... 788
RLDS Sources..... 788
Official Publications..... 788
Saints' Herald..... 788
The True Latter Day Saints' Herald..... 788
RLDS General Conference Reports..... 789
Joseph Smith III..... 789
Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III..... 789
Various Joseph Smith III Interviews and Correspondence..... 790
Emma Smith Sources..... 790
Emma Smith Interview (1879)..... 790
History of Joseph Smith by His Mother..... 790
Part III..... 791
Temple Lot and Documentary Evidence..... 791
Temple Lot Case Record..... 791
Early Church Newspapers..... 791
Part IV..... 792
Major RLDS Historians..... 792
Heman C. Smith..... 792
History of the Reorganized Church..... 792
F. Henry Edwards..... 792

Fundamentals....792
The Story of the Church....792
Richard P. Howard....793
Restoration Scriptures....793
Church Through the Years....793
Alma R. Blair....793
The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints....793
Part V....793
LDS Historical Scholarship....794
Richard Lyman Bushman....794
Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling....794
B. H. Roberts....794
New Witnesses for God....794
Comprehensive History of the Church....794
Leonard J. Arrington....794
Brigham Young: American Moses....795
James B. Allen....795
Studies in Mormon History....795
Part VI....795
Independent and Critical Historians....795
Jan Shipps....795
Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition....795
Dan Vogel....796
Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet....796
Fawn M. Brodie....796
No Man Knows My History....796
D. Michael Quinn....796
Part VII....797
Book of Mormon Scholarship....797
Hugh Nibley....797
John L. Sorenson....797
An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon....797
Blake T. Ostler....798

Grant Hardy....798
Understanding the Book of Mormon....798
Part VIII....798
Book of Abraham Sources....798
John Gee....798
Kerry Muhlestein....799
Robert K. Ritner....799
Brian M. Hauglid....799
Part IX....800
King Follett Discourse Sources....800
The King Follett Sermon....800
Stan Larson....800
The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text....800
Part X....801
Early Christianity and Theosis....801
Irenaeus....801
Against Heresies....801
Athanasius of Alexandria....801
On the Incarnation....801
Gregory of Nyssa....801
On the Soul and Resurrection....802
Maximus the Confessor....802
Ambigua....802
Origen....802
On First Principles....802
Part XI....802
Universal Restoration Sources....802
Origen....803
On First Principles....803
Gregory of Nyssa....803
Modern Universalist Scholarship....803
The Evangelical Universalist....803
That All Shall Be Saved....803

Part XII **804**
Community of Christ Sources **804**
Community of Christ Official Website 804
Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants 804
Part XIII **804**
Restoration Branch Sources **804**
Source Notes on Specific Chapters **805**
Chapters 1–8 805
Chapters 9–14 805
Chapters 15–18 806
Chapters 19–20 806
Chapters 21–24 806
Chapters 25–26 806
Final Source Statement **807**



The Lord Jesus Christ

The Prophet Joseph Smith

Reverend Moshe Reed, Servant and Prophet of Logos

Dedication

To the Truth, wherever it may be found.

To those who have loved the Restoration enough to question it,
and questioned it enough to understand it.

To the faithful Saints who preserved the witness of Jesus Christ through generations of hardship, sacrifice, and misunderstanding.

To the memory of **Joseph Smith Jr.**, whose life continues to inspire inquiry, devotion, controversy, and hope.

To **Emma Hale Smith**, whose steadfastness amid sorrow and persecution helped preserve the heritage of the Restoration.

To **Joseph Smith III** and the faithful men and women of the Reorganized Church who sought to defend what they believed was the original faith restored through the Prophet.

To all seekers of Zion, who believe that God still speaks, that truth is not exhausted, and that humanity is called to something greater than division, hatred, and fear.

Above all, this work is dedicated to **the Lord Jesus Christ**, the true foundation of the Restoration, the Light of the World, the Redeemer of humanity, and the source of every genuine revelation.

May this book encourage charity over contention, truth over falsehood, faith over fear, and hope over despair.

And may it remind all who read it that the purpose of the

Restoration was never the exaltation of a man, but the glorification of God and the building of His Kingdom on earth.

"Be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great."

Doctrine and Covenants 64:33

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

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"Be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great."

— Doctrine and Covenants 64:33

Preface

Why Another Book on Joseph Smith?

Few figures in American religious history have inspired more devotion, controversy, admiration, criticism, loyalty, and hostility than the Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. To some, he was a visionary religious genius whose influence reshaped the spiritual landscape of the modern world. To others, he was an imposter, an opportunist, or a misguided enthusiast caught in the fervor of nineteenth-century revivalism. Entire libraries have been written both in defense of and against him. Yet despite the vast quantity of material produced over nearly two centuries, the historical Joseph Smith remains remarkably elusive.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that Joseph Smith's legacy did not remain unified after his death. The movement he founded fractured into numerous competing organizations, each claiming some degree of continuity with the church established in 1830. Among these, the largest and most influential became the church led westward by Brigham Young into the Great Basin. Through its size, resources, and public visibility, the Utah-based tradition came to dominate popular perceptions of Mormon history.

As a result, many people today unconsciously assume that the history of Joseph Smith and the history of Utah Mormonism are one and the same. They imagine that every doctrine taught

in Salt Lake City originated with Joseph Smith. They assume that every practice associated with nineteenth-century Mormonism was approved by the Prophet himself. They often fail to distinguish between the teachings of Joseph Smith and the innovations of later leaders.

This confusion has profoundly affected both critics and defenders alike.

Critics frequently attack Joseph Smith for doctrines, policies, and practices that emerged after his death. Defenders often feel compelled to defend developments that may never have belonged to Joseph Smith's original vision at all. The result is a historical discussion clouded by assumptions, inherited narratives, and institutional loyalties.

The purpose of this book is neither to canonize Joseph Smith beyond criticism nor to shield him from legitimate historical inquiry. Rather, it is to examine the evidence carefully and to present a defense of Joseph Smith from the perspective of the Reorganized Restoration tradition.

This perspective has often been neglected in both popular and academic treatments of Mormon history.

For generations, members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), now known as the Community of Christ, argued that many controversial doctrines associated with Utah Mormonism represented departures from Joseph Smith's original teachings. They maintained that Joseph Smith neither instituted nor practiced the system of plural marriage later developed in Utah. They

rejected Adam-God theology, blood atonement, racial priesthood restrictions, and numerous other doctrines that arose under Brigham Young and his successors.

Whether one ultimately agrees with these conclusions is not the immediate question. The important point is that these arguments deserve serious consideration. Too often they have been dismissed without examination simply because the Utah tradition became numerically dominant.

History, however, is not determined by majority vote.

Truth is not established by population statistics.

The largest organization is not necessarily the most historically accurate.

The fact that one branch of a movement grows larger than another does not automatically mean that its interpretation of the founder is correct.

The Reorganization preserved an alternative memory of Joseph Smith, one that challenges many assumptions that have become commonplace in modern discussions of Mormonism. That memory deserves to be heard.

This book seeks to recover that neglected perspective.

The Problem of Historical Memory

Historical memory is rarely neutral.

Every religious tradition remembers its founders through particular lenses. Stories are emphasized or forgotten. Events are interpreted according to later theological commitments. Human beings naturally construct narratives that support the identities of the communities to which they belong.

This phenomenon is not unique to Mormonism.

Christians disagree about the legacy of the apostles.

Muslims disagree about the succession to Muhammad.

Buddhists disagree about the teachings of the Buddha.

Jews disagree about the meaning of Israel's prophets.

Likewise, Latter Day Saints have disagreed about Joseph Smith from the moment of his death.

The Joseph Smith remembered in Utah often differs significantly from the Joseph Smith remembered in the Reorganization.

The Joseph Smith described by critics often differs significantly from either.

The task of the historian is not merely to repeat inherited narratives but to investigate them.

Such investigation requires humility.

Historical sources are often incomplete.

Witnesses contradict one another.

Documents disappear.

Memories change over time.

Bias affects every participant.

Absolute certainty is rarely attainable.

Yet uncertainty does not mean that all interpretations are equally plausible.

Careful examination of evidence still matters.

Primary sources still matter.

Context still matters.

The goal of this book is therefore not blind defense but informed defense.

The Character of Joseph Smith

One of the most striking features of Joseph Smith's life is the extraordinary range of accusations leveled against him.

He has been called a deceiver.

A false prophet.

A treasure seeker.

A political conspirator.

A dictator.

A sexual libertine.

A racist.

A fraud.

A religious manipulator.

A heretic.

And many other things besides.

The sheer volume of accusations can create the impression that Joseph Smith must have been guilty of something.

Yet history teaches caution.

Great religious reformers often attract disproportionate hostility.

The Hebrew prophets were accused of treason.

Jesus was accused of blasphemy.

The apostles were accused of disturbing public order.

Early Christians were accused of cannibalism and atheism.

Religious innovators frequently become targets of rumor, exaggeration, and slander.

This observation does not prove Joseph Smith's innocence.

But it does remind us that accusations alone do not constitute evidence.

Each claim must be evaluated on its own merits.

Many charges against Joseph Smith collapse under scrutiny.

Others prove more complicated than either defenders or critics sometimes admit.

Still others remain genuinely disputed.

This book will attempt to distinguish among these categories rather than treating all criticisms as equally valid.

Joseph Smith and Polygamy

No issue has generated more controversy within Restoration history than plural marriage.

For many observers, polygamy defines Mormonism.

Indeed, the very word "Mormon" often evokes images of plural wives, frontier settlements, and patriarchal households.

Yet the Reorganization long maintained that Joseph Smith himself did not institute or practice the system later embraced in Utah.

This position has frequently been mocked.

It has often been dismissed as wishful thinking.

Yet the historical questions involved are more complex than many realize.

The evidence surrounding Nauvoo plural marriage is extensive but also deeply contested.

Documents conflict.

Witnesses disagree.

Testimonies were recorded decades after the events they describe.

Institutional interests shaped recollections.

Questions of reliability remain significant.

This book will examine these issues carefully and respectfully.

The goal is not to ignore evidence but to weigh it honestly.

Joseph Smith and Race

Another common accusation is that Joseph Smith was racist and that the Book of Mormon itself promotes racism.

Such claims require careful examination.

Joseph Smith lived in nineteenth-century America, a society deeply marked by slavery, racial prejudice, and social inequality.

No historical figure can be understood apart from his context.

Yet context is not destiny.

Joseph Smith's actual teachings regarding race often differed significantly from those later promoted in Utah.

Black men were ordained to priesthood offices during his lifetime.

Black converts participated in the church.

Joseph Smith increasingly opposed slavery during his later years.

These facts deserve serious consideration.

Likewise, passages within the Book of Mormon frequently cited as racist require careful interpretation.

Many Restorationists have argued that these texts involve covenant symbolism rather than biological superiority.

Others have proposed alternative readings grounded in ancient literary conventions.

Whether one accepts these interpretations or not, the matter is far more nuanced than simplistic accusations suggest.

The Book of Abraham

Among Joseph Smith's writings, few have generated as much debate as the Book of Abraham.

Modern Egyptology has complicated traditional assumptions about the relationship between the surviving papyri and the published text.

Critics often regard this issue as devastating.

Yet various explanations have been proposed by believing scholars.

Some suggest missing source materials.

Others advocate catalyst theories.

Still others view the text as inspired expansion rather than literal translation.

The Reorganization historically approached the Book of Abraham differently than Utah Mormonism.

This distinction allows alternative theological interpretations that deserve examination.

Rather than dismissing the text outright or demanding a rigid understanding of translation, Restorationists may explore broader possibilities concerning revelation, inspiration, and sacred scripture.

The King Follett Discourse

The King Follett Discourse occupies a unique place within Joseph Smith's theological development.

Some regard it as his greatest sermon.

Others view it as evidence of theological departure from traditional Christianity.

Still others see it as a foundation for later speculative doctrines.

Yet the surviving text is itself a reconstruction derived from multiple sets of notes rather than a verbatim transcript.

Understanding what Joseph Smith actually taught requires careful analysis.

This book will argue that many interpretations of the discourse reflect later developments rather than Joseph Smith's own intentions.

When read carefully, portions of the sermon can be understood in ways compatible with broader Restoration theology and even with certain streams of Christian mystical thought.

Why Joseph Smith Still Matters

Some may wonder why these questions remain important.

Joseph Smith died in 1844.

The controversies surrounding his life are nearly two centuries old.

Why revisit them?

The answer lies in influence.

Joseph Smith helped launch one of the most significant religious movements in modern history.

Millions of people trace their spiritual heritage to the Restoration he initiated.

His ideas continue to shape communities across the globe.

His scriptures remain sacred texts for countless believers.

His life continues to inspire intense interest among historians, theologians, philosophers, and seekers.

Whether one ultimately accepts Joseph Smith as prophet, visionary, reformer, or religious innovator, his significance cannot be denied.

Understanding him accurately therefore matters.

A Call for Fairness

This book is not written for blind believers.

Neither is it written for determined skeptics.

It is written for readers willing to examine evidence honestly.

It asks neither unquestioning faith nor automatic disbelief.

It asks only fairness.

If Joseph Smith deserves criticism, let it be based upon reliable evidence.

If accusations are false, let them be exposed.

If later traditions have obscured the historical record, let them be distinguished from earlier realities.

If misconceptions have spread, let them be corrected.

Historical inquiry should seek truth rather than confirmation of prior assumptions.

That principle guides the pages that follow.

The Road Ahead

The chapters ahead will examine Joseph Smith's life from his youth in New York to his death at Carthage Jail.

They will investigate major accusations made against him.

They will explore questions of race, scripture, succession, theology, and church history.

They will compare Restorationist and Brighamite interpretations where appropriate.

Most importantly, they will attempt to recover Joseph Smith as a historical person rather than merely a symbol.

The goal is not the defense of an institution.

The goal is not the defense of a denomination.

The goal is the defense of truth wherever it may lead.

If Joseph Smith was misunderstood, he deserves vindication.

If myths have obscured history, they deserve correction.

If the original Restoration has been overshadowed by later developments, it deserves renewed examination.

With that purpose in mind, we now turn to the world into which Joseph Smith was born and begin our exploration of the man whose life would alter the course of religious history.

Introduction

The Forgotten Joseph Smith

History remembers Joseph Smith in many different ways.

To some he is the founder of Mormonism.

To others he is a prophet of the Restoration.

To still others he is an American religious innovator, a charismatic leader, or a controversial figure whose life continues to inspire debate long after his death.

Yet behind all these images stands a fundamental question:

Which Joseph Smith are we talking about?

This question may seem strange at first. Surely there was only one Joseph Smith. Surely the man who lived from 1805 to 1844 is the same individual regardless of who studies him.

In one sense, this is obviously true.

Yet in another sense, Joseph Smith has become many different figures in the imagination of history.

There is the Joseph Smith portrayed by hostile nineteenth-century critics.

There is the Joseph Smith remembered by Utah Mormonism.

There is the Joseph Smith preserved by the Reorganized Church.

There is the Joseph Smith of academic historians.

There is the Joseph Smith of popular culture.

There is even the Joseph Smith imagined by people who know little about him beyond stereotypes.

Each version emphasizes different aspects of his life.

Each version tells a different story.

Each version claims legitimacy.

The result is that the historical Joseph Smith often disappears beneath layers of interpretation.

This book begins with the conviction that Joseph Smith deserves to be examined on his own terms rather than solely through the assumptions of later generations.

Before discussing accusations, controversies, or theological disputes, we must first understand how competing images of Joseph Smith emerged and why so many people today encounter only a partial picture of his life and teachings.

A Prophet Claimed by Many

Few religious founders have left behind such a fragmented legacy.

After Joseph Smith's death in 1844, the movement he founded entered a period of crisis.

Questions that had previously remained theoretical suddenly became urgent.

Who would lead the church?

Who possessed authority?

Who had inherited Joseph Smith's prophetic mantle?

Different answers produced different movements.

Some followed Brigham Young.

Others followed Sidney Rigdon.

Still others followed James Strang.

Additional groups emerged under various leaders.

Eventually, the Reorganization formed around Joseph Smith III, the eldest surviving son of the Prophet.

Each movement preserved portions of Joseph Smith's legacy while interpreting other portions differently.

This fragmentation produced competing narratives.

The Utah tradition increasingly viewed Brigham Young as the legitimate successor whose leadership represented continuity with Joseph Smith's final teachings.

The Reorganization viewed itself as preserving the original Restoration while rejecting later innovations.

Other groups developed their own perspectives.

As decades passed, these interpretations hardened into institutional memory.

Each tradition taught its members a particular version of Joseph Smith.

Each tradition emphasized different documents, testimonies, and events.

The historical Joseph Smith became intertwined with the identities of the movements that claimed him.

This process is not unique.

The same phenomenon occurred in early Christianity.

Different Christian groups remembered Jesus differently.

Different schools interpreted Paul differently.

Different communities emphasized different aspects of apostolic teaching.

The existence of multiple interpretations does not automatically prove that all interpretations are equally valid.

It does, however, require careful investigation.

The Triumph of the Utah Narrative

One reason the Reorganized perspective is often overlooked is simple demographics.

The church led west by Brigham Young became by far the largest branch of the Restoration movement.

Its growth transformed public perception.

Newspapers referred to Utah settlers as Mormons.

Books about Mormonism focused primarily on Utah.

National controversies centered on Utah practices.

Popular imagination increasingly equated Mormonism with the Utah church.

As a result, many people unconsciously assume that whatever characterized nineteenth-century Utah Mormonism must have originated with Joseph Smith.

This assumption influences both supporters and critics.

When critics condemn Mormon polygamy, they often attribute it directly to Joseph Smith.

When they discuss priesthood restrictions based on race, they frequently assume Joseph Smith originated them.

When they examine distinctive theological developments, they commonly treat them as unquestionably Joseph Smith's teachings.

Yet historical reality is more complicated.

The question is not whether Utah Mormonism inherited much from Joseph Smith.

Clearly it did.

The question is whether every major development in Utah can legitimately be traced to Joseph Smith himself.

The Reorganized tradition answered that question with a firm no.

Whether one agrees or disagrees, that answer deserves consideration.

History cannot simply assume its conclusion.

The Forgotten Reorganization

Modern readers are often surprised to learn how influential the Reorganization once was.

For generations, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints represented a major alternative Restoration tradition.

Its missionaries traveled throughout North America and beyond.

Its publications challenged Utah claims.

Its leaders collected documents, testimonies, and historical materials supporting their interpretation of Restoration history.

Most importantly, the Reorganization consistently argued that Joseph Smith's original vision had been altered after his death.

According to this view, doctrines such as plural marriage, Adam-God theology, blood atonement, and racial priesthood restrictions reflected later developments rather than original Restoration teachings.

The Reorganization therefore saw itself not as a breakaway movement but as a continuation of the church Joseph Smith organized in 1830.

This conviction shaped generations of Restorationist scholarship.

It inspired extensive historical investigation.

It produced alternative interpretations of controversial events.

Yet because the Utah church became larger and more visible, many outsiders remained unaware of these arguments.

Consequently, discussions about Joseph Smith often proceed as though only two positions exist:

Either accept the Utah narrative or reject Joseph Smith altogether.

The Reorganized perspective offers a third possibility.

One may defend Joseph Smith while questioning aspects of later Utah development.

One may affirm the Restoration while rejecting polygamy.

One may accept Joseph Smith's prophetic calling while disputing claims made by later leaders.

Whether these positions ultimately persuade readers is less important than recognizing their existence.

Historical fairness requires hearing all major voices.

The Creation of Myths

Every historical figure becomes surrounded by myths.

Some myths are favorable.

Others are hostile.

Both can obscure reality.

Joseph Smith is no exception.

Critics often portray him as a deliberate fraud who knowingly fabricated religious experiences for personal gain.

Yet this interpretation struggles to explain the sacrifices he endured.

Throughout his life he experienced imprisonment, violence, financial hardship, public ridicule, and eventually death.

While sincere people can certainly be mistaken, the image of a purely cynical deceiver becomes increasingly difficult to sustain when examined closely.

On the other hand, some admirers portray Joseph Smith as virtually incapable of error.

Such portrayals also distort history.

Joseph Smith was a human being.

He made mistakes.

He sometimes exercised poor judgment.

He occasionally revised his understanding of various issues.

Recognizing these realities does not undermine his significance.

In fact, it makes him more understandable.

Historical truth rarely lies at the extremes.

The challenge is distinguishing genuine evidence from inherited assumptions.

The Problem of Anti-Mormon Literature

From the earliest days of the Restoration, opponents produced literature attacking Joseph Smith.

Some criticisms were sincere attempts to challenge his claims.

Others were openly hostile.

Still others relied heavily on rumor.

The nineteenth century was a time of intense religious competition.

Revivalist groups frequently denounced one another.

Pamphlets circulated rapidly.

Sensational stories attracted readers.

Accusations spread faster than corrections.

Many anti-Mormon publications emerged within this environment.

Some contained valuable information.

Others repeated allegations with little verification.

Unfortunately, later writers sometimes treated all such sources as equally reliable.

The mere existence of an accusation became evidence of guilt.

Yet historians generally recognize that controversial figures attract distorted reporting.

Claims require examination.

Sources require evaluation.

Context matters.

The fact that an allegation was printed in a newspaper does not automatically make it true.

Nor does repetition transform speculation into fact.

Throughout this book we will encounter numerous accusations that originated under circumstances requiring careful scrutiny.

The Problem of Devotional History

Just as critics can distort history, defenders can distort it as well.

Religious communities naturally wish to honor their founders.

Stories become simplified.

Complex events become moral lessons.

Ambiguities disappear.

Contradictions are harmonized.

In some cases, difficult evidence is ignored.

This tendency appears across religious traditions.

It is not unique to the Restoration.

Devotional history often serves important purposes.

It inspires faith.

It preserves identity.

It strengthens community.

Yet devotional history and critical history are not always identical.

A mature understanding of Joseph Smith requires balancing both.

We need neither hostile caricature nor idealized mythology.

We need honest investigation.

Why Joseph Smith Still Provokes Strong Reactions

Nearly two centuries after his death, Joseph Smith remains a polarizing figure.

Few people feel neutral about him.

This itself is significant.

Many religious founders eventually fade into historical obscurity.

Joseph Smith has not.

Part of the reason lies in the boldness of his claims.

He did not merely propose a theological theory.

He claimed divine visitation.

He claimed angelic encounters.

He claimed revelation.

He claimed ancient scripture.

He claimed priesthood authority.

He claimed that God was actively restoring truths lost from the Christian world.

Such claims invite strong responses.

If true, they are enormously important.

If false, they demand explanation.

Either way, they cannot easily be ignored.

This helps explain why debates surrounding Joseph Smith continue generation after generation.

The questions he raised remain alive.

Joseph Smith and the Restoration Ideal

At the heart of Joseph Smith's mission stood a simple yet revolutionary idea:

Christianity required restoration.

Many Christians before Joseph Smith had expressed similar concerns.

Reformers sought to recover apostolic purity.

Movements arose claiming to restore New Testament faith.

Joseph Smith entered this broader tradition.

Yet he pushed the concept further.

He did not merely seek reform.

He proclaimed restoration through direct revelation.

According to his message, God had not abandoned humanity.

He continued to speak.

He continued to call prophets.

He continued to reveal truth.

This vision attracted followers because it offered hope.

The heavens were not closed.

Divine communication remained possible.

God was still involved in history.

Whether one accepts Joseph Smith's claims or not, their appeal is understandable.

They addressed deep spiritual longings that remain relevant today.

Recovering the Historical Joseph Smith

The purpose of this book is not to demand agreement.

Readers may ultimately reach different conclusions.

Some may embrace Joseph Smith as a prophet.

Others may admire him as a religious reformer.

Still others may remain unconvinced.

What matters is that conclusions be based upon evidence rather than assumptions.

The Joseph Smith who emerges from careful historical study is often more interesting than either his critics or his defenders imagine.

He was neither the monster portrayed by enemies nor the flawless figure imagined by some admirers.

He was a complex human being operating within extraordinary circumstances.

He inspired remarkable loyalty.

He generated intense opposition.

He founded a movement that survived his death and transformed the lives of millions.

Such achievements alone make him worthy of study.

But beyond historical significance lies another question.

Was Joseph Smith telling the truth?

That question cannot be answered merely by counting followers or critics.

It requires examining his life, teachings, character, and legacy.

That is the journey upon which we now embark.

Before evaluating accusations or theological controversies, we must first understand the world that shaped him.

We therefore turn next to the religious, cultural, and social environment of early nineteenth-century America—the world into which Joseph Smith was born, and the world from which the Restoration emerged.

Chapter 1

The Religious World into Which Joseph Smith Was Born

Early America and the Search for God

To understand Joseph Smith, one must first understand the world into which he was born.

No man appears in a vacuum.

Every person is shaped by family, culture, language, politics, religion, and circumstance. Great leaders may transcend their environment in important ways, but they never emerge entirely apart from it. The same is true of Joseph Smith Jr.

Much criticism of Joseph Smith begins with an assumption that his claims were unusual because they emerged within a religious culture. Critics sometimes suggest that revivalism explains away his experiences. Others argue that because he lived in a deeply religious society, his visions can be reduced to cultural influences.

Yet this argument misunderstands both Joseph Smith and his historical context.

The question is not whether Joseph Smith was influenced by the world around him. Every religious figure in history was

influenced by the world around him. Moses was influenced by Egypt. The Hebrew prophets were influenced by ancient Israel. Jesus spoke within the world of Second Temple Judaism. Martin Luther emerged from medieval Christianity.

The real question is whether Joseph Smith merely reflected his environment or whether he transformed it.

Before we can answer that question, we must first understand the America of his youth.

A New Nation

Joseph Smith was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont.

The United States itself was still young.

Only twenty-two years had passed since the conclusion of the American Revolution.

The Constitution had been ratified less than two decades earlier.

The nation remained uncertain about its future.

Political institutions were developing.

Economic systems were changing.

Large portions of the continent remained unsettled from the perspective of eastern Americans.

The United States was not yet the industrial giant it would later become.

Most people lived in rural communities.

Agriculture dominated daily life.

Families often worked together simply to survive.

Life was difficult.

Crop failures could devastate entire households.

Disease remained common.

Medical knowledge was limited.

Travel was slow.

Communication was often unreliable.

Religious faith therefore occupied a central place in many communities.

People looked to God for guidance, protection, and meaning.

This does not mean everyone was devout.

Human nature has changed little throughout history.

Some were deeply religious.

Others were indifferent.

Still others were skeptical.

Yet religion occupied a far more visible role in public life than it does in many modern Western societies.

For many Americans, questions about salvation, judgment, and eternal life were not abstract philosophical concerns.

They were matters of immediate importance.

The Second Great Awakening

Perhaps no single movement influenced Joseph Smith's early environment more than the Second Great Awakening.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the early nineteenth century, waves of religious revival swept across the United States.

Preachers traveled from town to town.

Large gatherings drew thousands.

People reported dramatic conversion experiences.

Churches expanded rapidly.

Religious enthusiasm became a defining feature of the era.

Historians refer to this period as the Second Great Awakening.

The movement transformed American Christianity.

Methodists grew rapidly.

Baptists expanded.

Presbyterians experienced renewed energy.

Numerous restorationist and reform movements emerged.

Religious competition increased dramatically.

The result was both spiritual excitement and considerable confusion.

Different ministers claimed biblical authority.

Different churches taught conflicting doctrines.

Each group often insisted that it possessed the truth.

Ordinary believers found themselves caught between competing claims.

This situation would profoundly affect the young Joseph Smith.

According to later accounts, one of his central concerns was determining which church he should join.

That concern only makes sense when viewed against the backdrop of revival-era America.

Modern readers sometimes imagine that Christianity in Joseph Smith's day was unified.

In reality, it was deeply fragmented.

Competing denominations argued vigorously.

Theological debates were common.

Religious divisions affected families, communities, and friendships.

The question of which church represented authentic Christianity was far from settled.

Joseph Smith inherited this environment.

The Burned-Over District

Western New York, where the Smith family eventually settled, became particularly famous for religious activity.

Historians have often referred to the region as the "Burned-Over District."

The phrase was coined to describe an area so heavily affected by revival preaching that it seemed every person had already been "burned over" by religious enthusiasm.

New movements flourished there.

Reform societies appeared.

Prophetic claims emerged.

Spiritual experimentation became common.

Some critics point to this environment as evidence against Joseph Smith.

They argue that because unusual religious claims were present in western New York, Joseph Smith's claims should be regarded as products of that culture.

The argument appears persuasive at first glance.

Yet it contains a significant weakness.

The fact that many people made religious claims does not explain why Joseph Smith succeeded where countless others failed.

Many revival preachers have been forgotten.

Most religious visionaries vanished into obscurity.

Most new movements disappeared within a generation.

Joseph Smith's movement survived.

It expanded.

It crossed continents.

It continues today.

The Burned-Over District may help explain why people were receptive to religious ideas, but it does not fully explain Joseph Smith's influence.

In fact, the extraordinary number of competing voices makes his success even more remarkable.

The Smith Family

The family into which Joseph Smith was born played a critical role in his development.

His father, Joseph Smith Sr., was known as a thoughtful and spiritually inclined man.

His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, possessed strong religious convictions and later recorded important memories concerning the family's experiences.

The Smith family was neither wealthy nor socially prominent.

They struggled financially throughout much of Joseph's youth.

Like many American families of the period, they experienced economic uncertainty and frequent relocation.

Yet poverty should not be confused with ignorance.

Hostile portrayals have sometimes depicted the Smith family as uneducated backwoods people incapable of serious thought.

Historical evidence paints a different picture.

Members of the family displayed considerable religious interest.

They discussed theological questions.

They reflected upon spiritual matters.

They sought meaning beyond material concerns.

Joseph Smith inherited this environment of spiritual searching.

His family did not belong entirely to one religious tradition.

Different members held different views.

Some attended particular churches.

Others remained dissatisfied with existing denominations.

This diversity exposed Joseph to a variety of religious perspectives.

Rather than receiving a rigid sectarian identity, he grew up amid questions.

Those questions would later become central to his spiritual journey.

Folk Christianity and Popular Religion

One of the most misunderstood aspects of early American religion involves what historians often call folk Christianity.

Modern people frequently imagine a sharp distinction between official religion and popular spiritual practices.

In reality, early nineteenth-century Americans often blended biblical faith with various traditional beliefs.

Dreams were taken seriously.

Providential signs were discussed.

People sought divine guidance through prayer and personal revelation.

Stories about angels, visions, and supernatural experiences circulated widely.

This does not mean everyone accepted every claim.

Skepticism certainly existed.

Nevertheless, the supernatural occupied a much more immediate place in everyday life than it does for many modern people.

Critics sometimes emphasize the Smith family's participation in certain folk practices, particularly those related to treasure seeking.

These issues will be examined in later chapters.

For now, it is enough to note that such activities were not nearly as unusual in early nineteenth-century America as modern readers often assume.

Many otherwise respectable individuals participated in similar practices.

The cultural world of Joseph Smith cannot be understood through twenty-first-century assumptions.

Historical context matters.

Religious Confusion and the Search for Truth

Perhaps the most important feature of Joseph Smith's early environment was religious uncertainty.

Contrary to modern stereotypes, the problem facing many Americans was not a lack of religion.

It was an abundance of religion.

Competing churches offered competing answers.

Each appealed to scripture.

Each claimed divine support.

Each criticized its rivals.

The result was confusion.

This situation affected the young Joseph Smith deeply.

According to his own account, he became troubled by denominational disagreements.

If sincere Christians interpreted the Bible differently, how could an ordinary person determine which interpretation was correct?

If multiple churches claimed authority, which one actually possessed it?

These questions were not unique to Joseph Smith.

Many Americans struggled with similar concerns.

Yet Joseph Smith's response would prove distinctive.

Rather than choosing among existing options, he eventually concluded that divine guidance was necessary.

This conviction became foundational to the Restoration.

Rationalism and Revivalism

Early America was shaped by two powerful intellectual currents.

One emphasized reason.

The other emphasized spiritual experience.

The Enlightenment encouraged confidence in human rationality.

Many educated Americans admired science, philosophy, and critical inquiry.

At the same time, revival movements emphasized personal conversion, emotional experience, and direct encounters with God.

These tendencies sometimes complemented one another.

At other times they conflicted.

Joseph Smith's later ministry would reflect elements of both.

He valued revelation.

He emphasized spiritual gifts.

Yet he also encouraged learning.

He established schools.

He promoted intellectual inquiry.

He resisted the notion that faith and knowledge must remain enemies.

This combination would become one of the distinctive features of Restoration thought.

Was Joseph Smith Simply a Product of His Time?

Critics frequently argue that Joseph Smith's teachings merely reflected ideas already circulating in his environment.

Certainly some influences can be identified.

No historical figure develops entirely independent of surrounding culture.

Yet influence is not the same as explanation.

The existence of religious revivalism does not explain the Book of Mormon.

The existence of denominational conflict does not explain Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

The existence of restorationist ideas does not explain the creation of a global religious movement.

Many individuals shared Joseph Smith's environment.

Only one founded the Restoration movement.

This does not prove divine inspiration.

Historical analysis alone cannot prove revelation.

What it does demonstrate is that simplistic explanations are inadequate.

Joseph Smith was shaped by his world.

But he also reshaped it.

That distinction is crucial.

The Importance of Context

Understanding Joseph Smith's environment helps us avoid two common mistakes.

The first mistake is treating him as though he appeared from nowhere.

The second is treating him as though he was nothing more than a product of his surroundings.

Neither extreme is accurate.

Historical figures emerge from particular contexts while simultaneously influencing those contexts.

Joseph Smith belongs in this category.

His experiences reflected the concerns of early nineteenth-century America.

Yet his ideas also transcended many of the assumptions of his era.

The Restoration cannot be understood apart from its historical setting.

Neither can it be reduced to that setting.

As we continue our study, we must keep both realities in mind.

The young Joseph Smith inherited a world filled with religious excitement, denominational rivalry, economic uncertainty, and spiritual searching.

Soon he would claim an experience that changed not only his own life but the course of Restoration history.

The story of that experience begins with a question:

Which church was true?

That question would lead a young farm boy into a grove of trees and eventually into one of the most controversial and influential religious movements in modern history.

Chapter 2

The First Vision

The Question That Changed Everything

Few events in the life of Joseph Smith have received more attention than what later became known as the First Vision.

For believers, it marks the opening of the Restoration and the beginning of a new era of divine revelation. For critics, it is often regarded as a later invention or a story that evolved over time. For historians, it remains one of the most important events in understanding both Joseph Smith and the movement he founded.

Regardless of one's conclusions, the First Vision occupies a central place in Restoration history.

Without it, the Restoration as Joseph Smith understood it becomes difficult to explain.

Without it, many of his later claims lose their context.

Without it, the trajectory of his life appears fundamentally different.

The First Vision was not originally presented as an isolated mystical experience.

It emerged from a profound spiritual crisis.

To understand the vision itself, we must first understand the question that led Joseph Smith into the woods.

That question was simple:

Which church was true?

Religious Division and Personal Anxiety

As discussed in the previous chapter, Joseph Smith grew up during a period of intense religious activity.

Revival meetings attracted large crowds.

Denominations competed for converts.

Preachers passionately defended their respective doctrines.

Many individuals experienced powerful emotional conversions.

The young Joseph Smith was deeply affected by this atmosphere.

According to his later accounts, the religious excitement in his area generated significant confusion.

Different churches claimed authority.

Different ministers interpreted scripture differently.

Each insisted that its teachings reflected the will of God.

For a sincere seeker, this situation created a problem.

How could an ordinary person determine which church was correct?

This question was not merely intellectual.

It carried eternal significance.

If salvation depended upon truth, then choosing the wrong path could have serious consequences.

Joseph Smith later recalled feeling troubled by the disagreements he witnessed among religious groups.

Rather than resolving his uncertainty, the conflicting claims increased it.

The more he listened, the more difficult the decision became.

This experience resonates with many people.

Religious diversity can be enriching.

It can also be confusing.

When multiple groups appeal to the same scriptures while reaching different conclusions, determining truth becomes challenging.

Joseph Smith confronted this dilemma directly.

The Influence of Scripture

According to Joseph Smith's account, his search eventually led him to the Bible.

In particular, one passage impressed him deeply.

The verse appears in the Epistle of James:

> "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God."

Joseph later described the impact of these words in dramatic terms.

They seemed to speak directly to his situation.

If God truly granted wisdom to those who sought it, perhaps the answer to his question did not lie in choosing between competing ministers.

Perhaps the answer could come from God Himself.

This idea reflected an important aspect of Joseph Smith's developing spirituality.

Rather than relying entirely upon human authority, he sought divine guidance.

Rather than accepting inherited assumptions, he desired direct confirmation.

This impulse would characterize much of his later ministry.

The Restoration was built upon the conviction that God still speaks.

The First Vision represents the earliest expression of that conviction.

The Sacred Grove

According to Joseph Smith's later recollections, he decided to pray in a secluded location near his family's home.

Seeking solitude, he entered a grove of trees.

There he intended to ask God which church he should join.

The image has become one of the most recognizable scenes in Restoration history.

A young man alone in the woods.

No congregation.

No clergy.

No ritual.

Only prayer.

The symbolism is powerful.

At a time when religious authorities disagreed, Joseph sought an answer beyond human institutions.

At a time when denominations competed, he turned directly to God.

Whether one accepts his account or not, the setting reflects themes that would later define the Restoration:

personal revelation,

direct divine communication,

and the possibility that God continues to guide humanity.

The Vision Itself

According to Joseph Smith's most familiar account, what began as prayer became something far more extraordinary.

He described experiencing an overwhelming darkness and spiritual opposition.

He felt unable to speak.

Fear overcame him.

Then, at the moment of greatest distress, he reported seeing a pillar of light descending from heaven.

Within the light appeared two glorious personages.

One introduced the other.

Joseph Smith later identified them as God the Father and Jesus Christ.

According to the account, Joseph asked which church he should join.

The answer surprised him.

He was told to join none of them.

The existing denominations possessed elements of truth but lacked the fullness God intended to restore.

A future work lay ahead.

The significance of this answer cannot be overstated.

Joseph Smith was not told to reform an existing church.

He was not told to select the best available denomination.

He was told that something new was coming.

This message became foundational to Restoration theology.

Why the First Vision Was Radical

Modern readers sometimes underestimate how radical Joseph Smith's claim was.

Many Christians believed God answered prayers.

Many believed in providence.

Many believed the Holy Spirit guided believers.

But claiming a direct appearance of divine personages was another matter entirely.

Such experiences were generally associated with biblical figures.

Prophets received visions.

Apostles encountered heavenly beings.

Ordinary people did not typically claim such encounters.

Joseph Smith's testimony therefore challenged prevailing assumptions.

If true, it suggested that the heavens were not closed.

If true, it implied that revelation continued.

If true, it called into question existing religious structures.

It is therefore unsurprising that the claim generated strong reactions.

Extraordinary claims inevitably attract scrutiny.

Early Opposition

Joseph Smith later reported that sharing his experience did not produce the response he expected.

Rather than receiving support, he encountered skepticism.

Ministers dismissed his account.

Others ridiculed it.

Some regarded it as deception.

Others viewed it as delusion.

This opposition profoundly affected him.

From his perspective, he had simply reported what he believed had happened.

Yet his testimony challenged established assumptions about revelation and authority.

Religious institutions often react cautiously toward claims of new revelation.

History provides numerous examples.

Prophetic figures frequently encounter resistance precisely because their experiences challenge existing structures.

Whether one accepts Joseph Smith's claims or not, his experience fits this broader historical pattern.

The Multiple Accounts Question

One of the most common criticisms of the First Vision concerns the existence of multiple accounts.

Joseph Smith recorded or dictated several versions of the story during his lifetime.

Critics point to differences between these accounts and argue that the vision was invented or altered over time.

This issue deserves careful examination.

The existence of multiple accounts is not disputed.

Different versions emphasize different details.

Some focus on personal forgiveness.

Others emphasize the question of church affiliation.

Certain elements appear in some accounts but not in others.

Critics often present these variations as evidence of fraud.

Yet historians generally approach such matters more carefully.

Human beings rarely tell important stories in exactly the same way every time.

Different audiences produce different emphases.

Different purposes shape narration.

Memories highlight different aspects of an event depending upon context.

This phenomenon appears throughout historical literature.

The existence of multiple accounts therefore does not automatically invalidate Joseph Smith's testimony.

The more important question concerns the nature of the differences.

Do the accounts contradict one another fundamentally, or do they emphasize different aspects of a shared experience?

Many historians, including some who remain skeptical of supernatural claims, conclude that the core narrative remains relatively consistent.

Joseph experienced a visionary encounter.

He sought divine guidance.

He received a message concerning existing churches.

These central themes appear repeatedly.

What the Variations Actually Show

From a Restorationist perspective, the multiple accounts may actually strengthen the historical case.

Fabricated stories are often repeated in rigidly identical form.

Authentic memories tend to display natural variation.

Witnesses remember different details at different times.

Important experiences acquire new significance as individuals reflect upon them.

This does not prove the vision occurred exactly as Joseph described.

History cannot prove supernatural events in the same manner it proves ordinary facts.

What it can demonstrate is that the existence of multiple accounts is not nearly as devastating as critics sometimes suggest.

Indeed, if Joseph Smith were intentionally constructing a deception, the presence of natural variation might be more difficult to explain than strict consistency.

Theological Significance

For Restoration believers, the importance of the First Vision extends beyond historical questions.

The event carries profound theological implications.

First, it affirms the reality of revelation.

God is not silent.

Divine communication remains possible.

Second, it emphasizes personal spiritual seeking.

Joseph Smith did not receive his answer because he possessed ecclesiastical authority.

He received it because he sincerely sought truth.

Third, it establishes the Restoration's understanding of apostasy and renewal.

The answer Joseph received suggested that Christianity required restoration rather than mere reform.

These themes became foundational to later Restoration teachings.

The RLDS Perspective

The Reorganized tradition historically placed great emphasis upon the First Vision.

Unlike later theological developments that became subjects of dispute, the First Vision occupied common ground across much of the Restoration movement.

The Reorganization viewed it as the beginning of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling.

At the same time, RLDS writers often interpreted the event within a broader Christian framework than some later Utah developments.

The First Vision was understood as a call to restore authentic Christianity rather than to establish an entirely separate religion.

This distinction would become important in later theological discussions.

For the Reorganization, Joseph Smith was not creating a new faith.

He was participating in God's work of renewing the ancient gospel.

Could Joseph Smith Have Invented the Story?

Ultimately, many readers will ask a simple question:

Did Joseph Smith invent the First Vision?

The answer depends partly upon one's assumptions regarding supernatural events.

Those who reject the possibility of divine revelation will naturally seek alternative explanations.

Psychological theories may be proposed.

Cultural influences may be emphasized.

Memory development may be examined.

Such approaches can offer insights.

Yet they also face limitations.

None fully explain Joseph Smith's lifelong commitment to his testimony.

None fully explain the movement that emerged from it.

None fully account for the transformative effect the experience had upon him and his followers.

Believers interpret the evidence differently.

They accept Joseph Smith's testimony substantially as he presented it.

For them, the First Vision represents a genuine encounter with the divine.

Historical investigation cannot compel either conclusion.

It can only examine the available evidence and assess competing interpretations.

The Beginning of a Prophetic Career

Whether viewed through the lens of faith or history, the First Vision marks a turning point.

The uncertain farm boy seeking answers would never again be quite the same.

The experience convinced him that God had heard his prayer.

It convinced him that revelation remained possible.

It convinced him that a future work awaited him.

Yet the Restoration did not begin immediately.

Years would pass before Joseph Smith publicly organized a church.

Additional experiences would follow.

Further preparation would occur.

Most importantly, another heavenly messenger would eventually appear and introduce Joseph Smith to a record said to contain the history of an ancient people and the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That record would become known as the Book of Mormon.

Its appearance would transform Joseph Smith from an obscure young seeker into one of the most controversial religious figures in American history.

The story of that transformation begins with the visits of an angel named Moroni.

Chapter 3

The Book of Mormon Comes Forth

Moroni and the Golden Plates

If the First Vision marked the beginning of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon marked the beginning of his public mission.

The First Vision was largely personal.

The Book of Mormon was public.

The First Vision depended primarily upon Joseph Smith's testimony.

The Book of Mormon involved witnesses, manuscripts, publication, and a growing movement.

Whatever one believes about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon stands at the center of the Restoration.

Without it, there would be no Restoration movement as we know it.

Without it, Joseph Smith would likely have remained an obscure religious seeker remembered only by family and neighbors.

Instead, the publication of the Book of Mormon transformed him into a figure of national attention and controversy.

Nearly two centuries later, it remains one of the most influential religious texts produced in North America.

The story of how it came forth is therefore essential to understanding Joseph Smith and the movement he founded.

The Night of September 21, 1823

According to Joseph Smith's account, several years passed between the First Vision and the next major phase of his calling.

During this period, he continued to mature, work, and reflect upon spiritual matters.

Like many young people, he did not always live up to his ideals.

Later accounts suggest that he viewed this period as one of preparation rather than perfection.

Then, on the night of September 21, 1823, a remarkable event allegedly occurred.

Joseph Smith reported that a heavenly messenger appeared in his room.

The messenger identified himself as Moroni.

According to Joseph's account, Moroni informed him of an ancient record written upon metal plates and hidden in a nearby hill.

This record contained the history of ancient inhabitants of the Americas and a fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The messenger also explained that Joseph would eventually be entrusted with the record and would translate it through divine assistance.

The experience reportedly repeated several times during the night and again the following day.

The message remained consistent.

A sacred work awaited him.

Yet he was not immediately permitted to obtain the plates.

Preparation would be necessary.

The Hill Cumorah

The location identified by Moroni was a hill near Joseph Smith's home in Manchester, New York.

According to the account, Joseph visited the site and discovered a stone box containing the plates along with other sacred objects.

Yet when he attempted to remove them, he was prevented.

Moroni instructed him to return annually.

Only after several years would he be allowed to take possession of the record.

Critics often find this aspect of the story difficult to accept.

Believers see it as evidence that the plates were treated as sacred objects requiring spiritual preparation.

Either way, the delay is significant.

If Joseph Smith were merely inventing a story, immediate possession might have been more convenient.

Instead, the narrative involves years of waiting and repeated instruction.

This period of preparation became an important part of Restoration memory.

The Character of Moroni

Within Restoration tradition, Moroni occupies a unique place.

According to the Book of Mormon itself, he was the final survivor of a civilization destroyed by war.

He preserved sacred records and eventually buried them for a future generation.

After death, he continued his ministry as a resurrected being.

Critics naturally reject this interpretation.

From their perspective, Moroni is either fictional or symbolic.

Yet it is worth noting that Joseph Smith consistently maintained the same basic account throughout his life.

He did not present Moroni as a vague spiritual impression.

He described him as a real person with a specific identity and mission.

This conviction would profoundly shape the Restoration's understanding of history and revelation.

Obtaining the Plates

According to Joseph Smith, he finally received the plates on September 22, 1827.

By this time he had married Emma Hale Smith, who would become one of the most important figures in the Restoration.

Emma's role is often overlooked in popular discussions, yet she provided critical support during the translation process.

After obtaining the plates, Joseph reported increasing opposition.

Rumors spread.

Curiosity intensified.

Some individuals attempted to locate or steal the plates.

Whether these accounts are interpreted literally or symbolically, they reflect an important reality:

Joseph Smith understood himself to be entrusted with something sacred and valuable.

Protecting the record became a major concern.

What Were the Plates?

According to Joseph Smith's description, the plates consisted of thin metal leaves bound together by rings.

They contained writing in what he called "reformed Egyptian."

The record purportedly chronicled the history of ancient peoples who migrated from the Near East to the Americas.

The narrative eventually culminated in the appearance of the risen Christ among them following His resurrection.

For believers, the plates represented an authentic ancient record.

For critics, alternative explanations have been proposed.

Some suggest Joseph Smith fabricated the plates.

Others argue that no plates existed at all.

Still others propose that Joseph possessed some kind of artifact that later became the basis for a religious narrative.

The challenge for every theory is explaining the available evidence.

The witnesses, the manuscripts, the rapid production of the text, and Joseph Smith's lifelong commitment to his account all require consideration.

The Translation Process

Perhaps no aspect of the Book of Mormon has generated more discussion than the translation itself.

According to Joseph Smith, he translated the record through divine assistance rather than through conventional linguistic knowledge.

This distinction is important.

Joseph Smith never claimed expertise in Egyptian languages.

He did not present himself as a trained scholar.

Instead, he consistently attributed the translation to revelation.

Various descriptions of the process exist.

Some accounts mention interpreters associated with the plates.

Others refer to a seer stone.

Still others emphasize inspiration more generally.

The precise mechanics remain debated even among believers.

What remains consistent is Joseph Smith's claim that the translation occurred through divine means.

Critics frequently regard this as evidence against authenticity.

Believers regard it as evidence that the work was miraculous.

The disagreement ultimately reflects deeper assumptions regarding revelation itself.

Emma Smith's Testimony

Emma Smith's testimony concerning the translation deserves special attention.

Throughout her life, she remained one of the closest observers of Joseph Smith's activities.

She served as a scribe during portions of the translation.

Years later, she recalled Joseph dictating for extended periods without consulting books or manuscripts.

She maintained that he lacked the education necessary to compose such a work independently.

Importantly, Emma never followed Brigham Young west.

Indeed, she often disagreed strongly with the Utah leadership.

Yet despite these disagreements, she consistently affirmed Joseph Smith's role in producing the Book of Mormon.

This testimony carries considerable weight.

Critics may question her conclusions, but her proximity to the events makes her an important witness.

Martin Harris and the Lost Manuscript

One of the earliest supporters of Joseph Smith was Martin Harris.

A respected farmer, Harris became convinced that Joseph possessed a genuine gift.

He provided financial assistance and served as an important early supporter.

Yet his involvement also produced one of the most difficult episodes in the translation process.

Harris repeatedly requested permission to show a manuscript portion to family members.

Eventually permission was granted.

The manuscript disappeared.

Approximately 116 pages were lost.

This incident created a major crisis.

Critics often argue that Joseph Smith should simply have retranslated the lost material.

Instead, he reported receiving revelation instructing him not to reproduce the missing pages.

Believers see wisdom in this response.

Had Joseph produced a second version, critics could have compared the two and accused him of inconsistency.

Instead, the narrative continued through an alternative source within the record itself.

The incident remains significant because it demonstrates the challenges faced by the early movement.

The translation process was not smooth or effortless.

Mistakes occurred.

Difficulties arose.

Human weaknesses were evident.

Oliver Cowdery and the Completion of the Translation

Following the loss of the manuscript, Oliver Cowdery became Joseph Smith's principal scribe.

His contribution to Restoration history cannot be overstated.

Much of the Book of Mormon was dictated during the period of their collaboration.

Cowdery later became one of the most important witnesses to the work.

Like Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery eventually experienced conflict with church leadership.

For a time he became estranged from the movement.

Yet he never denied his testimony concerning the Book of Mormon.

This fact deserves attention.

Hostile former associates often become valuable sources for critics.

Yet despite disagreements, Cowdery continued affirming the essential truthfulness of his experiences.

Such persistence complicates simplistic fraud theories.

The Three Witnesses

One of the most remarkable features of Book of Mormon history involves the Three Witnesses.

Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer testified that they were shown the plates by an angel and heard the voice of God affirming the translation.

Their testimony appears in every edition of the Book of Mormon.

Critics have proposed various explanations.

Some suggest visionary experiences rather than physical encounters.

Others question the reliability of the witnesses.

Still others argue that religious enthusiasm influenced their perceptions.

Yet certain facts remain noteworthy.

All three witnesses eventually separated from Joseph Smith to varying degrees.

Each experienced periods of conflict.

Yet none publicly denied the testimony they signed.

This does not prove their claims.

But it does strengthen the historical significance of their witness.

The Eight Witnesses

In addition to the Three Witnesses, eight other men testified that they physically handled the plates.

Their testimony differs from that of the Three Witnesses.

Rather than describing an angelic manifestation, they described direct physical examination.

Together, the witness statements represent one of the strongest evidentiary features of the Book of Mormon narrative.

Critics may dispute their conclusions.

They may question their interpretations.

But the existence of multiple witnesses cannot simply be ignored.

Any serious explanation of the Book of Mormon must account for them.

Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book Himself?

This question lies at the heart of much criticism.

Did Joseph Smith compose the Book of Mormon himself?

Certainly he participated in its production.

No one disputes that.

The issue is whether he independently authored it.

Several difficulties confront the theory of sole authorship.

First, Joseph Smith possessed limited formal education.

Second, the text was produced in a remarkably short period.

Third, witnesses consistently described dictation rather than literary composition.

Fourth, the resulting work displays significant narrative complexity.

These observations do not prove divine inspiration.

Talented individuals have accomplished extraordinary literary feats.

Yet they do challenge simplistic explanations.

The Book of Mormon remains a more substantial achievement than critics sometimes acknowledge.

The RLDS Perspective on the Book of Mormon

The Reorganized tradition has historically regarded the Book of Mormon as a foundational witness of Jesus Christ.

Unlike some later controversies surrounding plural marriage or succession, belief in the Book of Mormon united most branches of the Restoration.

The RLDS church consistently affirmed the book's spiritual importance.

At the same time, Restorationist thinkers often allowed greater flexibility regarding historical and archaeological questions than some later fundamentalist approaches.

The primary purpose of the Book of Mormon was viewed as theological rather than scientific.

It testified of Christ.

It called people to repentance.

It proclaimed God's ongoing involvement in history.

These themes remained central regardless of debates concerning specific historical details.

The Publication of the Book of Mormon

In 1830, the Book of Mormon was finally published.

The event marked the public emergence of the Restoration.

A young man from rural New York had produced a substantial religious text claiming ancient origins and divine authority.

Reactions were immediate.

Some embraced it.

Others ridiculed it.

Still others investigated it with curiosity.

Whatever one's opinion, the publication changed Joseph Smith's life forever.

He was no longer merely a visionary.

He was now the translator of a new scripture.

The consequences would be immense.

The book attracted converts.

It generated opposition.

It laid the foundation for a new religious movement.

Most importantly, it became the catalyst for the formal organization of a church that would eventually spread throughout the world.

The Restoration was moving from preparation to action.

The next step would be the establishment of the Church of Christ in 1830 and the beginning of Joseph Smith's public ministry as a prophet.

Chapter 4

Establishing the Church of Christ

Organization in 1830

The publication of the Book of Mormon marked the public beginning of Joseph Smith's mission, but it was not the end of the Restoration. According to Joseph Smith and his earliest followers, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was only one part of a larger divine work. Scripture had been restored, but a church had not yet been organized. A people had been gathered, but a community had not yet been established.

The next step would be the formal organization of the Church of Christ.

This event, modest in appearance yet monumental in consequence, occurred on April 6, 1830.

Few participants could have imagined how significant that day would become.

The gathering was small.

The resources were limited.

The future was uncertain.

Yet from that humble beginning emerged a movement that would eventually spread across continents and influence millions of lives.

To understand Joseph Smith fairly, one must understand the nature of the church he originally organized and how it differed from many later assumptions.

Why Organize a Church?

A common misconception portrays Joseph Smith as a man seeking power from the beginning.

According to this narrative, the Book of Mormon was merely a tool designed to establish personal authority.

Yet the historical evidence paints a more complex picture.

The early church did not resemble a wealthy institution.

It possessed no political influence.

It owned little property.

Its members often faced ridicule and persecution.

Joining offered few worldly advantages.

If Joseph Smith's primary goal had been personal gain, the path he chose was remarkably inefficient.

The organization of the church appears instead to have been motivated by religious conviction.

Joseph Smith believed God was restoring ancient Christianity.

Scripture alone was not enough.

Believers needed a covenant community.

They needed ordinances.

They needed organized worship.

They needed structures through which the restored gospel could be proclaimed.

These concerns reflected broader Christian traditions.

Throughout history, spiritual movements eventually required institutional forms.

The Restoration would prove no exception.

The Legal Formation of the Church

The church was organized in Fayette, New York, at the home of Peter Whitmer Sr.

Historical accounts differ slightly regarding attendance, but approximately thirty to sixty individuals were present.

The gathering was simple.

No grand cathedral existed.

No elaborate ceremonies occurred.

The movement was still in its infancy.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were recognized as leaders.

Members formally accepted the organization of the church.

Baptisms had already been occurring.

Now a permanent religious body came into existence.

The official name initially used was the Church of Christ.

This title reflected the movement's desire to restore New Testament Christianity rather than create an entirely new religion.

For Joseph Smith and his followers, they were not abandoning Christianity.

They believed they were restoring it.

This distinction remains important.

Critics sometimes portray the Restoration as a rejection of Christianity.

Early Restorationists generally understood themselves differently.

They saw themselves as participants in a divine renewal of the Christian faith.

The Early Membership

The first members came from diverse backgrounds.

Some had previously belonged to Baptist congregations.

Others came from Methodist or Presbyterian traditions.

Still others had no strong denominational affiliation.

What united them was not a shared theological system but a shared conviction regarding Joseph Smith's claims.

Most believed the Book of Mormon represented divine scripture.

Most believed God had called Joseph Smith as a prophet.

Most believed that a restoration of ancient Christianity was underway.

The movement therefore began with remarkable diversity.

This fact helps explain later theological developments.

Many early converts brought ideas and assumptions from previous religious experiences.

The Restoration did not emerge fully formed.

It developed gradually through revelation, discussion, and experience.

Understanding this developmental process is crucial.

Critics sometimes expect Joseph Smith's theology to appear complete from the beginning.

Historical evidence suggests otherwise.

The Restoration grew over time.

Early Revelations

One of the defining features of the early church was its reliance upon revelation.

Joseph Smith did not present himself merely as a preacher or administrator.

He claimed prophetic authority.

Accordingly, church members expected divine guidance.

Numerous revelations were recorded during the movement's earliest years.

Many addressed practical concerns.

Others discussed doctrine.

Still others provided encouragement during difficult circumstances.

These revelations eventually formed a collection known as the Doctrine and Covenants.

For the Reorganized tradition, the Doctrine and Covenants occupies a particularly important place because it continued beyond Joseph Smith's lifetime, eventually reaching Section 144 in the RLDS canon.

This emphasis on continuing revelation distinguishes Restoration Christianity from many forms of Protestantism.

Rather than viewing divine guidance as confined to biblical times, the Restoration affirmed God's ongoing activity within history.

Whether one accepts these revelations as divine or not, their influence upon the movement is undeniable.

They provided direction, identity, and cohesion.

Authority and Priesthood

One of the earliest questions confronting the church involved authority.

Why should anyone accept Joseph Smith's teachings?

What distinguished the Restoration from countless other religious movements?

Joseph Smith's answer centered upon priesthood authority.

According to Restoration accounts, heavenly messengers had restored authority originally held by ancient apostles.

This claim was extraordinary.

Most Christian denominations grounded authority in scripture, tradition, or institutional continuity.

Joseph Smith appealed to direct divine restoration.

The concept became foundational.

Baptism, ordination, and church governance were understood to operate under restored authority rather than merely human authorization.

Critics often regard these claims skeptically.

Believers view them as essential.

Either way, they played a crucial role in shaping Restoration identity.

Worship in the Early Church

Early church worship was relatively simple.

Meetings included prayer, preaching, singing, scripture reading, and testimony.

Formal liturgy remained limited.

Members frequently spoke spontaneously.

Spiritual gifts were encouraged.

Reports of visions, healings, prophecy, and speaking in tongues appeared among some believers.

Such practices reflected broader revivalist influences while also expressing distinctive Restoration convictions.

The early church expected God to act.

Faith was not merely intellectual.

It involved lived experience.

This emphasis attracted many converts who felt dissatisfied with what they perceived as spiritually stagnant religious institutions.

At the same time, spiritual enthusiasm occasionally produced excesses.

Joseph Smith sometimes found himself moderating behavior he regarded as inappropriate.

This tension between spiritual freedom and orderly worship would continue throughout Restoration history.

The Role of the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon quickly became central to missionary efforts.

Early missionaries carried copies wherever they traveled.

Many converts first encountered the Restoration through its pages.

The book functioned as both scripture and evidence.

It testified of Jesus Christ.

It also served as tangible proof of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

Critics often assume the Book of Mormon occupied a secondary role behind Joseph Smith's personality.

Historical evidence suggests otherwise.

Many converts reported being persuaded primarily by the book itself.

They prayed about its message.

They read its teachings.

They concluded that it contained divine truth.

The book's influence upon early growth cannot be overstated.

Opposition Begins

Growth brought opposition.

Religious movements rarely emerge without resistance.

The Restoration challenged existing churches.

It introduced new scripture.

It claimed new revelation.

It questioned traditional authority structures.

Such claims inevitably provoked criticism.

Some ministers denounced Joseph Smith publicly.

Newspapers ridiculed the movement.

Rumors spread rapidly.

Members sometimes lost friendships or family support after conversion.

These difficulties strengthened group identity.

Persecution became part of Restoration memory.

Believers interpreted opposition as evidence that they were participating in God's work.

Critics saw it differently.

Yet regardless of interpretation, conflict became a defining feature of early church life.

Was Joseph Smith Seeking Power?

One recurring criticism deserves consideration.

Some argue that Joseph Smith organized the church primarily to acquire power over others.

Certainly he became an influential leader.

Certainly his authority expanded over time.

Yet the earliest period of church history complicates simplistic assumptions.

The movement began small.

Resources remained scarce.

Leadership brought significant burdens.

Joseph Smith spent much of his life facing lawsuits, financial difficulties, public hostility, and personal danger.

The historical record does not resemble the career of a man steadily accumulating comfort and privilege.

This observation does not prove every decision he made was wise.

Nor does it settle theological questions.

It simply reminds us that motivations are often more complex than critics suggest.

Human beings rarely devote their lives to a cause solely for benefits that never fully materialize.

The Restoration as Community

One of Joseph Smith's most significant achievements involved creating community.

The early church offered more than doctrine.

It offered belonging.

Members viewed themselves as participants in a sacred mission.

They supported one another.

They shared hardships.

They cultivated hope.

This communal dimension helps explain the movement's survival.

Ideas alone rarely sustain religious movements.

People remain because relationships matter.

The Restoration provided both spiritual vision and social connection.

Even critics acknowledged the remarkable loyalty displayed by many early converts.

Such loyalty deserves explanation.

It cannot simply be dismissed as irrational enthusiasm.

Something meaningful was occurring within these communities.

The RLDS View of the Early Church

The Reorganized tradition has long regarded the early church as the purest expression of Joseph Smith's vision.

Before later controversies emerged, the movement focused primarily upon Christ, scripture, revelation, mission, and community.

RLDS writers often contrasted this period with developments they believed occurred later under Brigham Young.

Whether one accepts that interpretation or not, the distinction highlights an important historical question:

What elements of Restoration belief originated with Joseph Smith, and what elements developed afterward?

This question will recur throughout the chapters ahead.

Understanding the early church provides an essential baseline for evaluating later claims.

Seeds of Future Growth

Although small in 1830, the church possessed extraordinary momentum.

Missionaries traveled widely.

New converts joined.

Revelations continued.

The movement expanded beyond New York.

What began in a rural farmhouse soon spread into neighboring states.

The next major phase of Restoration history would unfold in Ohio and Missouri.

These years would bring both remarkable growth and intense suffering.

They would test Joseph Smith's leadership and shape the future of the movement in profound ways.

Most importantly, they would reveal that the Restoration was not merely a theological project.

It was becoming a people.

And that people would soon face challenges that threatened its very existence.

Conclusion

The organization of the Church of Christ in 1830 transformed Joseph Smith's mission from a private calling into a public movement.

The Restoration now possessed scripture, leadership, ordinances, and community.

Its members believed they were participating in a divine work that would prepare the world for God's purposes.

Whether one views these claims through faith or skepticism, the significance of this moment is undeniable.

From a small gathering in New York emerged a movement that would alter the course of American religious history.

The years ahead would bring expansion, conflict, revelation, and persecution.

They would also bring questions that continue to shape discussions of Joseph Smith to this day.

The next chapter follows the Saints into Ohio and Missouri, where hopes for Zion would collide with the harsh realities of frontier America.

Chapter 5

Kirtland, Missouri, and Persecution

Zion and Gathering

By the early 1830s, the Restoration had progressed far beyond the small circle that gathered in Fayette, New York. Missionary efforts were producing converts in multiple regions. New congregations were appearing. Joseph Smith's influence was expanding. The movement was no longer merely surviving; it was growing.

Yet growth brought new challenges.

A church scattered across distant communities required greater organization. Converts desired guidance. Leaders needed to determine where the Saints should gather. Questions concerning the future of the Restoration became increasingly urgent.

Out of these concerns emerged one of the most important ideas in early Restoration history:

Zion.

The concept would inspire extraordinary sacrifice, profound devotion, and heartbreaking disappointment.

It would shape nearly every major event of Joseph Smith's ministry.

To understand the successes and failures of the early church, one must understand the Restoration vision of Zion.

The Meaning of Zion

The word "Zion" already possessed deep biblical significance.

In scripture, Zion could refer to Jerusalem, the people of God, or the ideal society established under divine guidance.

Joseph Smith and the early Saints embraced all these meanings while adding new dimensions.

For them, Zion was not merely a spiritual condition.

It was also a community.

It represented a people gathered together in covenant with God.

It embodied righteousness, unity, justice, and preparation for God's future purposes.

Importantly, early Restorationists did not view Zion as an escape from the world.

They viewed it as the transformation of the world.

The Saints hoped to build communities reflecting divine principles.

This vision attracted many converts.

In a period marked by economic uncertainty and social change, the promise of a holy society held enormous appeal.

The Restoration offered more than personal salvation.

It offered a collective destiny.

Kirtland, Ohio

One of the earliest centers of the Restoration emerged in Kirtland, Ohio.

Missionaries traveling westward encountered a religious group led by figures such as Sidney Rigdon.

Many members accepted the Book of Mormon and joined the church.

The resulting influx of converts dramatically increased church membership.

Joseph Smith soon relocated to Ohio.

Kirtland became the headquarters of the movement for several years.

The period was significant for several reasons.

Membership expanded rapidly.

Important revelations were received.

Church structures developed.

Doctrinal understanding deepened.

Many foundational elements of Restoration theology emerged during these years.

For believers, Kirtland represented a period of remarkable spiritual vitality.

For critics, it also provided examples of controversy and difficulty.

Both perspectives deserve examination.

Sidney Rigdon and New Leadership

Among the most important converts was Sidney Rigdon.

A gifted preacher and influential religious leader, Rigdon brought both experience and credibility to the movement.

His conversion strengthened the church considerably.

Critics have sometimes suggested that Rigdon secretly collaborated with Joseph Smith in producing the Book of Mormon.

These theories have circulated for generations.

Yet historians have repeatedly noted the lack of convincing evidence supporting such claims.

No credible documentation demonstrates pre-publication collaboration.

The theory persists largely because some critics consider it a convenient explanation.

Historical evidence, however, remains insufficient.

Regardless of one's conclusions, Sidney Rigdon became a major figure in the early church and played a significant role in its development.

Spiritual Gifts and Religious Enthusiasm

The Kirtland period witnessed numerous reports of spiritual manifestations.

Members described visions, prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, and other charismatic experiences.

Such phenomena reflected both the broader religious culture of the era and distinctive Restoration expectations.

The Saints believed God was actively working among them.

They expected spiritual gifts.

They expected revelation.

They expected divine intervention.

These expectations created enthusiasm.

They also occasionally produced excesses.

Not every claimed spiritual experience proved beneficial.

Joseph Smith sometimes criticized behaviors he believed reflected emotional excitement rather than genuine inspiration.

This point is important.

Critics occasionally portray Joseph Smith as encouraging every extraordinary claim.

The historical record suggests a more complicated reality.

While he affirmed spiritual gifts, he also attempted to regulate them.

Order and discernment remained important concerns.

The Law of Consecration

Among the most ambitious experiments of the Kirtland era was the Law of Consecration.

This system sought to create greater economic equality among church members.

Participants dedicated property to the church and received stewardships according to need and circumstance.

The goal was not forced collectivism.

Rather, it reflected an attempt to apply Christian principles of stewardship, generosity, and communal responsibility.

The experiment faced significant challenges.

Human nature proved difficult to transform.

Economic realities complicated implementation.

Misunderstandings arose.

Ultimately, the system achieved only limited success.

Critics sometimes cite these difficulties as evidence of failure.

Yet many religious communities throughout history have attempted similar experiments with mixed results.

The important point is that Joseph Smith's vision extended beyond theology.

He sought practical ways to build a more just and unified society.

Whether his methods succeeded is a separate question.

The aspiration itself reveals much about the Restoration's ideals.

Missouri and the Promise of Zion

While Kirtland developed in Ohio, another center emerged in Missouri.

According to revelations received by Joseph Smith, Jackson County, Missouri, was designated as the location for Zion.

The Saints viewed this region with extraordinary hope.

They expected it to become the center of a future holy society.

Missionaries traveled there.

Settlements expanded.

Land was purchased.

Families relocated.

The dream of Zion seemed increasingly attainable.

Yet beneath the optimism lay serious tensions.

The Saints were entering a frontier environment already marked by cultural, political, and economic conflict.

Their arrival generated suspicion among local residents.

These tensions would eventually erupt into violence.

Why the Saints Were Opposed

Popular accounts sometimes portray opposition to the Saints as entirely irrational.

While prejudice certainly played a role, the historical situation was more complex.

Several factors contributed to hostility.

First, the Saints often migrated in large numbers.

Rapid population growth altered local political dynamics.

Longtime residents feared losing influence.

Second, the Saints tended to vote as a group, increasing concerns regarding political power.

Third, many church members opposed slavery or held views that differed from prevailing attitudes in Missouri.

Fourth, religious differences created suspicion.

Claims of revelation, new scripture, and prophetic leadership alarmed many neighbors.

These concerns do not justify violence.

Understanding motivations is not the same as excusing actions.

Yet historical analysis requires examining all relevant factors.

Conflict rarely emerges from a single cause.

Expulsion from Jackson County

By 1833, tensions reached a breaking point.

Violence erupted.

Mobs attacked church members.

Property was destroyed.

Printing presses were demolished.

Families were driven from their homes.

The Saints were ultimately forced to leave Jackson County.

The expulsion represented a devastating blow.

The place designated as Zion had become a site of suffering.

Believers struggled to understand why God had permitted such events.

Critics questioned Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

If Missouri truly represented Zion, why had the Saints been driven out?

These questions would haunt the movement for years.

Yet the expulsion also strengthened group identity.

Shared suffering created powerful bonds.

The Saints increasingly viewed themselves as a persecuted people.

This perception would become a recurring theme throughout Restoration history.

Zion's Camp

In response to events in Missouri, Joseph Smith organized an expedition known as Zion's Camp.

The purpose was to assist displaced Saints and seek restoration of their rights.

Hundreds participated.

The journey involved considerable hardship.

Disease spread among participants.

Objectives were not fully achieved.

Critics frequently portray the expedition as a failure.

From a purely military perspective, this assessment appears reasonable.

Yet many participants later viewed the experience differently.

The camp provided leadership training.

Future church leaders emerged from its ranks.

Shared sacrifice strengthened commitment.

Joseph Smith himself gained valuable experience.

Consequently, Zion's Camp illustrates an important historical principle:

Events that appear unsuccessful in the short term may produce significant long-term effects.

The Kirtland Temple

Despite difficulties elsewhere, Kirtland witnessed one of the most significant achievements of Joseph Smith's ministry.

The Saints constructed a temple.

For a relatively poor religious movement, the project required enormous sacrifice.

Members donated labor, resources, and funds.

Many gave far beyond their means.

The temple's completion in 1836 represented a major milestone.

Dedication services generated reports of powerful spiritual experiences.

Participants described visions, manifestations, and profound feelings of divine presence.

Believers interpreted these events as confirmation of God's approval.

Critics naturally offered alternative explanations.

Yet regardless of interpretation, the Kirtland Temple became a defining symbol of Restoration faith.

It demonstrated the Saints' willingness to sacrifice for their beliefs.

Financial Crisis and Internal Conflict

The Kirtland years were not entirely triumphant.

Economic difficulties emerged, particularly surrounding the Kirtland Safety Society.

Joseph Smith and other leaders hoped the institution would assist church members economically.

Instead, broader financial instability contributed to its collapse.

The resulting losses created significant disillusionment.

Some members blamed Joseph Smith.

Others questioned his judgment.

Several prominent leaders left the church.

Critics often emphasize this episode as evidence against Joseph Smith's prophetic abilities.

Believers typically distinguish between prophetic calling and economic expertise.

The issue remains important because it highlights Joseph Smith's humanity.

He was not merely a religious figure.

He also confronted practical challenges involving finance, administration, and community leadership.

Like many leaders, he experienced both successes and failures.

The Question of Persecution

One of the most persistent debates concerning early church history involves persecution.

Were the Saints genuinely persecuted, or were they simply experiencing the consequences of their own actions?

Some critics argue that church members provoked opposition through political and social behavior.

Some defenders portray all hostility as entirely unprovoked.

Historical reality appears more nuanced.

The Saints certainly made mistakes.

Like any community, they were not perfect.

Yet the violence inflicted upon them frequently exceeded any reasonable response.

Homes were destroyed.

Families were displaced.

Individuals were assaulted.

Legal protections often failed.

Even historians unsympathetic to Joseph Smith generally acknowledge that church members suffered significant mistreatment.

Recognizing this reality does not require accepting every Restoration claim.

It simply requires acknowledging historical evidence.

Lessons from Kirtland and Missouri

The experiences of Kirtland and Missouri profoundly shaped Joseph Smith and the Restoration.

Several lessons emerged.

First, building Zion proved more difficult than many had anticipated.

Idealistic visions encountered practical realities.

Second, persecution could strengthen rather than destroy religious commitment.

Third, leadership required resilience.

Joseph Smith faced criticism from enemies and supporters alike.

Fourth, the Saints increasingly understood themselves as a covenant people whose destiny involved both suffering and hope.

These themes would continue to influence the movement for the remainder of Joseph Smith's life.

The RLDS Understanding of Zion

The Reorganized tradition later developed a distinctive understanding of Zion.

While affirming the importance of gathering and community, RLDS thinkers increasingly emphasized Zion as a spiritual and ethical reality rather than solely a geographic destination.

Justice, peace, reconciliation, and Christlike living became central themes.

This perspective allowed Restorationists to preserve Joseph Smith's vision while adapting it to changing historical circumstances.

The dream of Zion survived even when particular locations did not.

Conclusion

The years in Kirtland and Missouri revealed both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the early Restoration.

The movement grew rapidly.

Temples were built.

Revelations continued.

Communities formed.

At the same time, conflict, disappointment, financial difficulty, and persecution tested the Saints severely.

Joseph Smith emerged from these experiences both strengthened and scarred.

He had witnessed remarkable successes.

He had also experienced devastating setbacks.

Yet neither he nor his followers abandoned the Restoration.

Instead, they pressed forward into a new chapter of their history.

That chapter would unfold in Illinois, where the city of Nauvoo would rise from the banks of the Mississippi River and where Joseph Smith's influence would reach its greatest extent.

It would also be the place where controversy intensified, opposition mounted, and the Prophet's life moved steadily toward its tragic conclusion.

Chapter 6

Nauvoo and the Final Years

The Rise of a New City

The expulsion from Missouri left the Saints exhausted, displaced, and uncertain about the future.

Homes had been abandoned.

Property had been lost.

Families had been scattered.

Many members wondered whether the Restoration could survive another major setback.

Yet if Joseph Smith demonstrated anything throughout his ministry, it was resilience.

Again and again, circumstances that appeared capable of destroying the movement instead became opportunities for renewal.

The aftermath of Missouri would prove no exception.

Out of suffering emerged a new beginning.

That beginning was called **Nauvoo**.

For believers, Nauvoo represented hope restored.

For critics, it marked the period during which Joseph Smith accumulated unprecedented influence.

For historians, it remains one of the most fascinating episodes in American religious history.

It was a city built by refugees.

A community created by people who had lost nearly everything.

And it would become both the greatest achievement and the greatest crisis of Joseph Smith's life.

Escape from Missouri

Following the Mormon War of 1838 and the infamous Missouri Extermination Order issued by Governor Lilburn Boggs, church members faced severe difficulties.

Joseph Smith himself spent months imprisoned.

The experience left a profound impression upon him.

During confinement he wrote letters encouraging the Saints to remain faithful despite suffering.

These writings reveal both frustration and determination.

Critics sometimes portray Joseph Smith as primarily concerned with authority and power.

His prison correspondence often presents a different image.

One finds concern for families, grief over injustice, and a persistent belief that God had not abandoned His people.

Eventually Joseph escaped custody while being transferred between locations.

The legality of the escape has been debated.

Supporters viewed it as providential.

Critics viewed it as evidence of wrongdoing.

Regardless of interpretation, Joseph rejoined the Saints and began planning the future.

Finding a New Home

The church ultimately established itself in Illinois along the Mississippi River.

The location possessed several advantages.

Land was available.

Political leaders appeared sympathetic.

The state offered opportunities unavailable in Missouri.

The settlement initially occupied swampy terrain that many outsiders considered undesirable.

Disease was common.

Conditions were difficult.

Yet the Saints saw possibility where others saw obstacles.

They drained land.

Constructed buildings.

Established farms and businesses.

Over time the settlement grew into a thriving city.

It became known as Nauvoo, a name Joseph Smith associated with beauty and pleasantness.

The transformation was remarkable.

Within only a few years, Nauvoo became one of the largest cities in Illinois.

This achievement alone deserves attention.

Whatever one's opinion of Joseph Smith's religious claims, his ability to inspire collective effort was extraordinary.

A City Built by Faith

The growth of Nauvoo reflected more than organizational skill.

It reflected devotion.

Thousands of converts immigrated from across the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Many sacrificed comfort and security to gather with fellow believers.

The city became a center of religious, social, economic, and political activity.

Streets were laid out.

Homes were constructed.

Businesses developed.

Schools were established.

A temple project commenced.

The Saints believed they were building more than a city.

They believed they were participating in the establishment of Zion.

This conviction motivated tremendous effort.

The success of Nauvoo challenged assumptions that the Restoration would fade following Missouri.

Instead, the movement entered one of its most dynamic periods.

The Nauvoo Charter

One of the most important developments involved the granting of the Nauvoo Charter by the Illinois legislature.

The charter provided unusual municipal powers.

Nauvoo received authority to organize a city government, establish courts, and maintain a militia known as the Nauvoo Legion.

Supporters viewed these provisions as necessary protections.

Missouri had demonstrated the dangers faced by vulnerable religious minorities.

The Saints desired legal mechanisms capable of preventing similar abuses.

Critics saw matters differently.

They feared concentration of power.

They worried that Nauvoo might operate independently of normal political constraints.

These concerns intensified as the city expanded.

The charter would eventually become a focal point of controversy.

Yet understanding its origins is essential.

Many of the powers granted to Nauvoo emerged from a genuine desire to prevent future persecution.

Joseph Smith as Mayor, General, and Prophet

During the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith occupied multiple leadership roles.

He served as mayor.

He held military authority within the Nauvoo Legion.

He remained president of the church.

Critics often point to this concentration of authority as evidence of dangerous ambition.

Supporters emphasize context.

Frontier communities frequently relied upon a limited number of capable leaders.

Furthermore, Joseph Smith had become the central figure in a rapidly growing movement.

Members trusted him.

They repeatedly selected him for positions of responsibility.

The historical question is not whether Joseph possessed significant influence.

Clearly he did.

The question is how that influence should be interpreted.

Was he constructing a personal kingdom?

Or was he attempting to protect and organize a vulnerable community?

Reasonable observers have reached different conclusions.

This book will argue that many accusations exaggerate both Joseph Smith's intentions and his actual power.

Religious Liberty and Political Participation

One of the lesser-known aspects of Nauvoo involves Joseph Smith's commitment to religious liberty.

Although the Saints had suffered persecution, Joseph repeatedly advocated protection for the rights of all faiths.

He argued that liberty should extend not only to Christians but also to Jews, Muslims, and others.

Such statements were notable in nineteenth-century America.

The Restoration's emphasis upon agency and conscience contributed to these views.

At the same time, church members increasingly participated in politics.

Their growing numbers made them an important voting bloc.

Politicians courted their support.

Opponents feared their influence.

Political tensions therefore became intertwined with religious concerns.

This combination would prove volatile.

The Nauvoo Temple

The construction of the Nauvoo Temple became one of the defining projects of the city's existence.

Like the earlier Kirtland Temple, it required extraordinary sacrifice.

Workers donated labor.

Families contributed resources.

Despite poverty and hardship, construction continued.

For the Saints, the temple represented sacred space.

It symbolized divine presence and covenant commitment.

The building also testified to the permanence of the movement.

Temporary religious enthusiasm rarely produces monumental architecture.

The temple proclaimed confidence in the future.

Even as opposition increased, the Saints invested enormous energy into its completion.

This determination reflected deep faith.

Increasing Opposition

As Nauvoo grew, opposition intensified.

Several factors contributed.

The city's rapid expansion alarmed neighboring communities.

Political influence generated resentment.

Economic competition created tensions.

Religious differences remained significant.

Former church members sometimes became outspoken critics.

Newspapers published accusations.

Rumors circulated widely.

Joseph Smith faced criticism from multiple directions.

Some attacks focused upon theology.

Others concerned politics.

Still others targeted personal character.

The atmosphere grew increasingly hostile.

Importantly, not all criticism was identical.

Some concerns were legitimate.

Others were exaggerated.

Still others were entirely false.

Distinguishing among these categories remains one of the central tasks of historical investigation.

The Question of Polygamy

No discussion of Nauvoo can avoid addressing plural marriage.

This subject remains among the most disputed issues in Restoration history.

The traditional Utah narrative holds that Joseph Smith introduced plural marriage during the Nauvoo period under divine command.

The Reorganized tradition historically rejected this claim, arguing that the practice originated after Joseph Smith's death or that evidence linking him to it was unreliable.

Because this question occupies such a central place in debates about Joseph Smith, it will receive detailed treatment later in this book.

For now, it is sufficient to note that allegations concerning plural marriage contributed significantly to growing opposition.

Whether those allegations accurately reflected Joseph Smith's actions remains one of the major historical questions examined in subsequent chapters.

The Nauvoo Expositor Crisis

The immediate events leading to Joseph Smith's death centered upon a newspaper known as the *Nauvoo Expositor*.

Published by dissidents, the paper criticized Joseph Smith and church leadership.

Its first issue contained numerous accusations.

Some involved political matters.

Others involved theological concerns.

Still others concerned alleged secret practices.

The Nauvoo City Council declared the newspaper a public nuisance and ordered the destruction of its press.

This decision proved disastrous.

Supporters argued that the council acted within legal authority as understood at the time.

Critics viewed the destruction as a violation of freedom of the press.

The action generated outrage throughout the region.

Opposition escalated dramatically.

Even some individuals previously sympathetic to the Saints became alarmed.

The crisis moved rapidly beyond local control.

Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign

Amid mounting tensions, Joseph Smith launched an unlikely presidential campaign.

His platform included several notable proposals.

He advocated prison reform.

He supported compensated emancipation of enslaved persons.

He called for stronger protections of religious liberty.

He proposed various economic and governmental reforms.

Modern readers sometimes find the campaign surprising.

Yet it reflected Joseph Smith's growing engagement with national issues.

Repeated failures of state governments to protect the Saints convinced him that broader reforms were necessary.

Critics interpreted the campaign as evidence of excessive ambition.

Supporters viewed it as a sincere attempt to address systemic problems.

Whatever one's conclusions, the campaign further increased Joseph Smith's visibility and controversy.

Arrest and Imprisonment

Following the Expositor affair, legal charges were filed.

Joseph Smith initially considered fleeing westward.

Ultimately, however, he returned and submitted to arrest.

This decision remains significant.

Critics often portray him as seeking to avoid accountability.

Yet his return to Illinois suggests a more complicated reality.

Joseph reportedly recognized that fleeing might endanger the Saints.

He therefore chose to face legal proceedings.

He and several associates were imprisoned in Carthage Jail.

Tensions remained high.

Many feared violence.

Promises of protection proved inadequate.

The situation was increasingly dangerous.

The Martyrdom at Carthage

On June 27, 1844, a mob attacked Carthage Jail.

During the assault, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed.

The event shocked the Restoration movement.

Believers viewed the deaths as martyrdom.

Critics offered varying interpretations.

Yet regardless of perspective, the killings represented a profound tragedy.

Joseph Smith was thirty-eight years old.

His life ended violently.

Questions remained unresolved.

Plans remained unfinished.

The future of the movement became uncertain.

The significance of the event extended beyond the Restoration.

The killing of a religious leader while under state protection raised serious concerns regarding law, order, and religious liberty in America.

Even individuals who disagreed strongly with Joseph Smith often condemned the violence.

What Kind of Man Died at Carthage?

The answer depends largely upon whom one asks.

To devoted followers, Joseph Smith died as a prophet.

To critics, he died as a controversial religious leader whose actions contributed to conflict.

To historians, he remains a complex figure who defies simplistic categories.

He founded a new religious movement.

He produced scripture.

He inspired extraordinary loyalty.

He generated intense opposition.

He displayed both remarkable strengths and evident human limitations.

Any fair assessment must acknowledge this complexity.

Caricatures are insufficient.

Neither complete idealization nor complete demonization adequately explains the historical record.

The RLDS Interpretation of Joseph's Death

The Reorganized tradition long emphasized Joseph Smith's role as a martyr for religious truth while distinguishing his legacy from later developments associated with Utah Mormonism.

RLDS writers argued that Joseph should be evaluated based upon his own teachings and actions rather than doctrines they believed emerged afterward.

This perspective remains important.

Much of the controversy surrounding Joseph Smith involves questions of continuity and succession.

Did later leaders preserve his vision or alter it?

The answer depends partly upon how one understands his life and death.

The chapters ahead will explore these questions in detail.

Conclusion

Nauvoo represented both the high point and the final chapter of Joseph Smith's earthly ministry.

The city demonstrated what the Restoration could accomplish when given opportunity.

It also revealed the tensions that accompanied rapid growth, concentrated leadership, and religious innovation.

By the time of his death, Joseph Smith had transformed a small movement into a significant religious force.

He left behind scripture, institutions, revelations, followers, and controversies.

He also left behind unanswered questions.

Foremost among them was a question that would immediately divide the movement:

Who would succeed him?

The answer would shape the future of the Restoration and determine whether Joseph Smith's vision continued, changed, or fragmented.

Before addressing that crisis, however, we must examine the many accusations that have been leveled against Joseph Smith throughout history and ask a fundamental question:

Was Joseph Smith a fraud?

Part II

Refuting False Allegations Against Joseph Smith

Chapter 7

Was Joseph Smith a Fraud?

The Central Accusation

Of all the accusations ever made against Joseph Smith, none is more fundamental than the charge of fraud.

If Joseph Smith knowingly deceived people, then questions about revelation, scripture, priesthood authority, and the Restoration become largely irrelevant. If he fabricated his religious claims, then the movement he founded rests upon deliberate falsehood. Critics therefore often regard fraud as the master explanation that makes every other controversy unnecessary.

Yet accusations require evidence.

The seriousness of a charge does not establish its truth.

The fact that critics have repeated the accusation for nearly two centuries does not prove its validity.

The question before us is not whether Joseph Smith's claims were extraordinary. They unquestionably were.

The question is whether the historical evidence supports the conclusion that he knowingly and intentionally deceived others.

This distinction matters.

A person may be mistaken without being fraudulent.

A person may hold unusual beliefs without being dishonest.

A person may sincerely report experiences that others reject.

Fraud requires something more.

It requires intentional deception.

The burden of proof therefore rests upon those making the accusation.

What Would Fraud Look Like?

Before examining evidence, we should establish what fraud would actually entail.

If Joseph Smith were a fraud, several expectations naturally follow.

He would knowingly invent experiences he understood to be false.

He would deliberately manipulate followers for personal gain.

His private conduct would likely contradict his public claims.

Close associates would eventually expose the deception.

Financial, political, or sexual advantages would consistently appear as primary motivations.

The historical record should reveal conscious dishonesty.

These expectations provide a useful framework.

The question is not whether Joseph Smith made mistakes.

He clearly did.

The question is whether the evidence demonstrates deliberate fraud.

The Cost of Being Joseph Smith

One of the most significant problems confronting fraud theories involves the cost Joseph Smith paid for his claims.

Throughout his life he endured ridicule, lawsuits, imprisonment, violence, poverty, betrayal, and ultimately death.

This observation does not prove his claims were true.

History contains many sincere individuals who were mistaken.

Yet it does complicate the fraud hypothesis.

Successful frauds generally produce benefits.

Joseph Smith's life often produced suffering.

From the publication of the Book of Mormon onward, opposition followed him almost continuously.

He was tarred and feathered.

His property was threatened.

His family endured hardship.

He spent months in jail.

He was repeatedly forced to relocate.

Finally, he was murdered.

Critics sometimes respond that Joseph Smith sought power and influence.

Certainly he acquired both.

Yet influence alone does not explain why someone would persist in a deception despite enormous personal risk.

Fraud becomes a less convincing explanation when the supposed deceiver consistently pays a heavy price for maintaining the alleged deception.

The Testimony of Those Who Knew Him Best

Another difficulty for fraud theories involves the testimony of individuals who knew Joseph Smith personally.

His family remained loyal.

His wife Emma consistently defended his sincerity, even when she disagreed with others who claimed to represent his legacy.

Many early associates maintained their testimonies throughout life.

Importantly, several individuals who later separated from Joseph Smith never denied the foundational experiences that initially convinced them.

Oliver Cowdery provides an important example.

He experienced conflict with church leadership.

He left the church for a period.

Yet he never denied his witness concerning the Book of Mormon.

The same general pattern appears with David Whitmer and Martin Harris.

Had Joseph Smith been consciously deceiving those around him, one might expect close associates eventually to expose the fraud.

Instead, many remained convinced that extraordinary events had occurred.

This does not prove their conclusions.

It does, however, make deliberate deception more difficult to establish.

The Book of Mormon Problem

For critics, the Book of Mormon often serves as evidence of fraud.

For defenders, it serves as evidence against fraud.

Both sides recognize its importance.

The question is how its existence should be interpreted.

Joseph Smith produced a lengthy religious text containing complex narratives, extensive theological discussions, multiple voices, and an overarching historical framework.

The text appeared within a relatively short period.

Witnesses described dictation rather than careful literary composition.

Critics offer various explanations.

Some argue that Joseph Smith possessed greater creative abilities than traditionally acknowledged.

Others suggest he drew upon existing ideas and sources.

Still others emphasize oral storytelling traditions.

These theories deserve consideration.

Yet even many non-believing scholars acknowledge that the Book of Mormon represents a remarkable achievement.

The existence of the book does not automatically prove divine inspiration.

Neither does it automatically prove fraud.

Rather, it presents a challenge that any explanation must address adequately.

Did Joseph Smith Profit Financially?

A common accusation portrays Joseph Smith as someone who invented religion for money.

This claim enjoys popularity because it appears intuitive.

People understand financial motives.

Religious conviction is often more difficult to evaluate.

Yet the historical record creates problems for this theory.

Joseph Smith spent much of his life struggling financially.

Church projects frequently consumed available resources.

Legal difficulties generated expenses.

Economic setbacks repeatedly occurred.

The Restoration never made Joseph Smith wealthy in the conventional sense.

Indeed, many critics of his own era mocked him for financial failures.

This does not mean money played no role in church history.

Religious movements require resources.

Buildings must be constructed.

Publications must be printed.

Missionary work requires support.

Yet the image of Joseph Smith becoming rich through religion finds little support in the historical evidence.

His financial circumstances were often precarious.

The Human Side of Joseph Smith

One reason some people assume Joseph Smith was fraudulent is that they expect prophets to be flawless.

When they discover human weaknesses, they conclude the prophetic claims must therefore be false.

This reasoning contains a hidden assumption.

It assumes genuine religious figures must possess extraordinary perfection.

History offers little support for such an expectation.

Biblical prophets displayed flaws.

Ancient apostles made mistakes.

Religious leaders throughout history have struggled with weaknesses.

Joseph Smith was no exception.

He could be impulsive.

He occasionally exercised poor judgment.

He experienced frustration.

He sometimes changed his mind.

These realities do not automatically disprove his claims.

In fact, the historical record's willingness to preserve imperfections may actually increase its credibility.

Fraudulent biographies tend to eliminate weaknesses.

The record of Joseph Smith's life does not.

The Evolution of Doctrine

Critics often point to developments in Joseph Smith's theology as evidence of fraud.

Teachings appear to evolve.

New concepts emerge.

Earlier understandings sometimes expand.

The accusation assumes that changing theological views necessarily indicate deception.

Yet religious history suggests otherwise.

Theology often develops over time.

Thinkers refine ideas.

New questions arise.

Understanding deepens.

The early Christian church itself experienced significant doctrinal development.

The same pattern appears throughout religious history.

The existence of theological growth does not prove fraud.

The more relevant question is whether Joseph Smith presented new insights as revelations received over time or whether he secretly altered teachings while pretending consistency.

The historical evidence generally supports the first interpretation.

Joseph Smith openly claimed continuing revelation.

He did not claim complete theological knowledge from the beginning.

Why Critics Find Fraud Appealing

The fraud hypothesis remains attractive because it offers simplicity.

Complex historical questions become easy to answer.

Difficult evidence can be dismissed.

Contradictions disappear.

Everything becomes the product of a single explanation.

Human beings naturally prefer simple narratives.

Yet history is rarely simple.

Complex figures require complex analysis.

Joseph Smith's life contains too many unusual features to fit comfortably within a straightforward fraud model.

The loyalty of witnesses.

The persistence of followers.

The production of scripture.

The willingness to endure persecution.

The continued growth of the movement.

These realities do not prove divine intervention.

But they do suggest that more sophisticated explanations are necessary.

Fraud, Delusion, or Sincerity?

Discussions about Joseph Smith often revolve around three broad possibilities.

First, he was a conscious fraud.

Second, he was sincerely mistaken or deluded.

Third, he was genuinely inspired.

Historians cannot fully resolve the third possibility because supernatural claims fall partly outside the methods of historical investigation.

What historians can evaluate is the evidence for conscious deception.

When examined carefully, that evidence often appears weaker than critics assume.

Many scholars who reject Joseph Smith's prophetic claims nevertheless hesitate to describe him as a deliberate fraud.

They recognize genuine sincerity in his convictions.

This distinction is important.

A person can reject Joseph Smith's theology while still acknowledging his apparent honesty.

The historical record increasingly supports such nuance.

The RLDS Perspective

The Reorganized tradition consistently rejected the accusation that Joseph Smith was a fraud.

RLDS writers emphasized his sincerity, sacrifices, and commitment to the Restoration.

At the same time, they often distinguished between Joseph Smith and later developments they believed misrepresented his teachings.

This distinction formed a central element of RLDS apologetics.

Joseph Smith was defended not because he was viewed as perfect but because he was viewed as a genuine prophet seeking to restore Christianity.

The Reorganization therefore approached criticisms by examining evidence rather than assuming guilt.

This approach remains valuable today.

Historical claims should be investigated carefully rather than accepted uncritically.

The Test of Martyrdom

While martyrdom alone does not prove truth, it does provide insight into conviction.

People may die for false beliefs.

History demonstrates this repeatedly.

What people rarely do is die for claims they know to be false.

Joseph Smith faced opportunities to abandon his mission.

He faced opportunities to deny controversial claims.

Instead, he persisted.

His death at Carthage does not prove revelation.

It does, however, challenge the image of a cynical deceiver.

The evidence suggests a man who genuinely believed in his calling.

Whether that belief was correct remains a separate question.

But sincerity matters.

Fraud requires conscious deception.

The historical record provides surprisingly little evidence for such deception.

Conclusion

The accusation that Joseph Smith was a fraud occupies a central place in criticism of the Restoration.

Yet when examined carefully, the evidence often fails to support the simplicity of the charge.

Joseph Smith certainly made mistakes.

He faced controversies.

He generated opposition.

Reasonable people may reject his prophetic claims.

But rejecting those claims is not the same as proving fraud.

The historical record reveals a more complex figure:

a religious visionary,

a charismatic leader,

a flawed human being,

and a man apparently convinced of his divine mission.

Whether one ultimately accepts or rejects Joseph Smith's claims, fairness requires acknowledging this complexity.

The question is not merely whether his experiences were genuine.

The question is whether the evidence demonstrates intentional deception.

Thus far, the answer appears far less certain than critics often suggest.

The next accusation frequently raised against Joseph Smith concerns his involvement with treasure seeking and folk practices during his youth.

Critics often portray these activities as proof of dishonesty.

Supporters argue that they have been misunderstood and exaggerated.

To evaluate the matter fairly, we must examine the historical context in which such practices occurred.

Chapter 8

Joseph Smith and Money-Digging

Folk Religion, Treasure Seeking, and Historical Context

Among the most frequently repeated criticisms of Joseph Smith is the claim that he was a "money-digger" or treasure seeker before founding the Restoration. Critics often present this accusation as though it settles the question of his character immediately. According to this narrative, Joseph Smith's involvement in treasure-seeking activities demonstrates that he was a deceiver from the beginning and that the Restoration simply grew out of earlier fraudulent practices.

The reality is considerably more complicated.

As with many issues surrounding Joseph Smith, the question is not whether certain events occurred. Historical evidence strongly suggests that Joseph Smith participated in treasure-seeking activities during his youth. The real questions concern context, meaning, and interpretation.

What exactly was treasure seeking?

How common was it?

How did people understand it?

Does participation in such activities demonstrate fraud?

Or does the accusation depend upon modern assumptions imposed upon an earlier culture?

To answer these questions fairly, we must first enter the world of early nineteenth-century America.

The World of Folk Christianity

Modern Western society often separates religion from folk beliefs.

Many people assume that respectable Christians attended church while superstitious individuals pursued magical practices.

Early nineteenth-century America was not nearly so tidy.

The boundaries between religion, folklore, and popular spirituality were often fluid.

Ordinary people prayed for divine guidance.

They interpreted dreams.

They discussed signs and omens.

They believed angels might appear.

They spoke about hidden treasures.

They sought protection from harmful spiritual influences.

Many practices that seem strange today appeared entirely normal within their historical setting.

This observation does not prove every belief was true.

It simply reminds us that historical context matters.

A modern reader who assumes all treasure-seeking activity was inherently fraudulent risks misunderstanding the culture in which Joseph Smith lived.

Treasure Seeking in Early America

Treasure-seeking traditions existed throughout colonial and early American society.

Stories circulated about buried wealth left behind by pirates, soldiers, travelers, Native peoples, or earlier settlers.

Legends attached themselves to particular hills, caves, and fields.

People often believed that treasures could be discovered through special means.

Various methods were employed.

Some used divining rods.

Others relied upon dreams.

Some consulted individuals believed to possess unusual spiritual perception.

Still others combined prayer with folk practices.

These activities occurred across social classes.

Participation was not limited to criminals or charlatans.

Respectable farmers, merchants, and community members sometimes became involved.

The practice was far more widespread than many modern readers realize.

Understanding this reality is essential before evaluating Joseph Smith's participation.

Joseph Smith's Involvement

Historical records indicate that Joseph Smith occasionally participated in treasure-seeking expeditions during his youth.

Several accounts mention his use of a seer stone.

Individuals sometimes sought his assistance in locating hidden objects or buried treasure.

Critics frequently emphasize these activities.

From their perspective, Joseph Smith's later use of seer stones in connection with the Book of Mormon appears suspicious.

They argue that treasure seeking and revelation belong to the same pattern of behavior.

The implication is clear:

If Joseph Smith engaged in treasure seeking, then his religious claims should be regarded as extensions of earlier deception.

Yet this conclusion assumes what it seeks to prove.

Participation in treasure-seeking activities does not automatically establish fraudulent intent.

The historical question remains open.

What did Joseph Smith himself believe he was doing?

Fraud or Sincerity?

This distinction is crucial.

Many critics assume that treasure seeking necessarily involved conscious deception.

Historical evidence suggests otherwise.

Numerous participants genuinely believed such activities could succeed.

People acted upon assumptions very different from those common today.

If Joseph Smith sincerely believed spiritual gifts could assist in locating hidden objects, then his participation reflects mistaken belief rather than fraud.

The difference matters enormously.

A sincere but mistaken person is not necessarily dishonest.

Fraud requires intentional deception.

Evidence for deliberate deception remains surprisingly limited.

Indeed, many accounts portray Joseph Smith as genuinely convinced that certain abilities or spiritual perceptions existed.

Whether modern readers accept those beliefs is another matter.

The point is that sincerity and fraud are not identical.

The Seer Stone Question

No discussion of treasure seeking can avoid the subject of seer stones.

According to various accounts, Joseph Smith possessed one or more stones that he believed could aid spiritual perception.

Critics often regard this as evidence of superstition.

Believers have interpreted the matter differently.

Throughout biblical history, God frequently worked through physical objects.

The Urim and Thummim served priestly functions.

Moses used a staff.

The Ark of the Covenant occupied a central religious role.

These examples do not prove Joseph Smith's claims.

They do demonstrate that the concept of physical instruments associated with spiritual activity is not foreign to religious tradition.

The key question remains whether Joseph Smith sincerely believed such objects could assist in receiving divine guidance.

The available evidence strongly suggests that he did.

The 1826 Court Proceeding

One of the most frequently cited events in discussions of treasure seeking is Joseph Smith's appearance before a local court in 1826.

Critics often describe the event as a criminal conviction for fraud.

The historical record is considerably less clear.

Documentation concerning the proceeding is incomplete.

Scholars continue to debate important details.

Some accounts suggest Joseph was examined regarding treasure-seeking activities.

Whether he was formally convicted remains uncertain.

Even among historians critical of Joseph Smith, significant disagreement exists regarding the precise nature of the case.

What is clear is that opponents have sometimes exaggerated the evidence.

The popular image of Joseph Smith being definitively convicted as a fraud does not rest upon strong historical foundations.

The surviving records simply do not support such certainty.

Why Critics Emphasize Treasure Seeking

The answer is understandable.

If Joseph Smith can be portrayed as a treasure-seeking charlatan before founding the Restoration, then later religious claims become easier to dismiss.

The narrative provides continuity.

The Book of Mormon becomes merely another treasure story.

Revelation becomes another folk belief.

Prophetic claims become another example of deception.

The problem is that historical reality resists such simplification.

Joseph Smith's life changed dramatically after the emergence of the Restoration.

The scale of his ambitions changed.

The content of his message changed.

The consequences of his actions changed.

Even if one views his religious claims skeptically, reducing everything to treasure seeking fails to explain the complexity of subsequent events.

The Transformation of Joseph Smith

One of the most important observations concerns development.

Human beings change.

Young adults often hold beliefs they later abandon.

Experiences reshape priorities.

Responsibilities alter perspectives.

Even if Joseph Smith participated enthusiastically in treasure-seeking activities as a young man, this does not necessarily define the remainder of his life.

The Joseph Smith who translated the Book of Mormon, organized a church, built communities, and died at Carthage was not simply a teenager searching for buried treasure.

His life followed a trajectory far more complicated than critics sometimes acknowledge.

Historical analysis should account for growth and change rather than freezing individuals permanently at one stage of life.

Folk Practices and Religious Experience

Some scholars have suggested that Joseph Smith's treasure-seeking background may actually help explain certain aspects of the Restoration.

This observation need not be hostile.

People frequently interpret religious experiences through familiar cultural frameworks.

A person raised in one environment may describe spiritual encounters differently than someone raised elsewhere.

If Joseph Smith possessed a worldview that accepted visions, angels, sacred objects, and divine intervention, then his later claims become more understandable.

Importantly, understanding does not equal disproving.

Explaining how a person interprets experiences is not the same as explaining away those experiences.

Throughout history, religious figures have understood divine encounters through the language and concepts available to them.

Joseph Smith was no exception.

The Witness of Emma Smith

Emma Smith's testimony again proves valuable.

As Joseph Smith's wife and close companion, she observed him more closely than almost anyone else.

Despite later disagreements with various factions of the Restoration movement, she consistently defended Joseph's sincerity.

Emma never described her husband as a con man or deliberate deceiver.

This fact deserves attention.

If Joseph Smith had knowingly fabricated religious claims, Emma would have occupied an ideal position to recognize the deception.

Yet her testimony remained supportive.

This does not prove every claim Joseph Smith made.

It does challenge portrayals of him as a conscious fraud.

The RLDS Interpretation

The Reorganized tradition historically approached treasure-seeking accusations with caution.

RLDS writers generally acknowledged Joseph Smith's participation in certain folk practices while rejecting exaggerated claims.

More importantly, they argued that youthful activities should not be used to dismiss an entire religious movement.

The essential question was not whether Joseph Smith once participated in treasure-seeking expeditions.

The essential question was whether God later called him as a prophet.

These are separate issues.

A person's early experiences do not automatically determine the truth or falsehood of later claims.

The Reorganization therefore focused upon the fruits of Joseph Smith's ministry rather than treating treasure seeking as a decisive argument.

The Problem of Presentism

One of the greatest dangers in historical analysis is presentism—the tendency to judge past societies exclusively by modern assumptions.

Treasure seeking appears strange to many contemporary readers.

Yet future generations may regard some current beliefs as equally strange.

Historical understanding requires empathy.

People should be evaluated within their own cultural environments.

This does not mean suspending critical judgment.

It means avoiding simplistic conclusions.

Joseph Smith's participation in treasure-seeking activities becomes far more understandable when viewed against the broader backdrop of early American folk religion.

Context does not eliminate questions.

It does prevent distortion.

What the Evidence Actually Shows

When all evidence is considered, several conclusions appear reasonable.

First, Joseph Smith participated in treasure-seeking activities during his youth.

Second, such activities were relatively common within certain segments of early American society.

Third, participation does not automatically demonstrate fraud.

Fourth, evidence for deliberate deception remains weak.

Fifth, critics have often exaggerated the significance of treasure seeking while neglecting broader historical context.

These conclusions neither prove nor disprove Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

They simply provide a more balanced understanding of the evidence.

Conclusion

The accusation that Joseph Smith was a treasure-seeking fraud remains one of the most enduring criticisms of his character.

Yet careful examination reveals a far more nuanced picture.

The historical Joseph Smith emerged from a culture where folk beliefs, spiritual practices, and religious experiences frequently overlapped.

His participation in treasure-seeking activities reflects that environment.

Whether those activities represented mistaken beliefs, sincere spiritual exploration, or something else remains open to interpretation.

What they do not clearly demonstrate is conscious fraud.

The evidence is simply insufficient.

As so often happens in discussions of Joseph Smith, a popular accusation becomes less convincing when examined closely.

The historical figure proves more complex than the caricature.

The next major accusation against Joseph Smith concerns criminal behavior and legal controversies.

Critics often portray him as a habitual lawbreaker.

Supporters argue that many charges were politically motivated, exaggerated, or unsupported.

To evaluate these claims fairly, we must turn to the court records, legal disputes, and controversies that followed Joseph Smith throughout much of his life.

Chapter 9

Joseph Smith and Criminal Allegations

Court Cases, Arrests, and the Question of Guilt

One of the most common arguments used against Joseph Smith is surprisingly simple:

"If Joseph Smith was constantly being arrested, he must have been a criminal."

At first glance, the argument appears persuasive.

Joseph Smith was indeed involved in numerous legal disputes throughout his life.

He was arrested multiple times.

He appeared in court repeatedly.

His name appears in a substantial number of legal records.

Critics often present these facts as self-evident proof that Joseph Smith was dishonest, dangerous, or criminal.

Yet history requires greater care.

Legal accusations are not identical to guilt.

Arrests are not convictions.

Court appearances are not proof of wrongdoing.

If they were, many historical reformers, religious leaders, political dissidents, and civil rights advocates would automatically become criminals simply because authorities opposed them.

The real question is not whether Joseph Smith encountered legal trouble.

He unquestionably did.

The real question is what those legal troubles actually reveal.

When the records are examined carefully, a more complicated picture emerges.

Why Joseph Smith Appeared in Court So Often

Before discussing specific allegations, it is important to understand the environment in which Joseph Smith lived.

Nineteenth-century America was remarkably litigious.

People sued one another frequently.

Debt disputes, property disagreements, business conflicts, and personal grievances commonly ended up before local courts.

Frontier communities often relied heavily upon legal proceedings because institutions remained relatively undeveloped.

Furthermore, Joseph Smith occupied a uniquely controversial position.

He founded a new religious movement.

He challenged established churches.

He attracted devoted followers.

He generated intense opposition.

Under such circumstances, legal conflict became almost inevitable.

The existence of numerous lawsuits therefore tells us relatively little by itself.

What matters is the outcome and nature of those cases.

The Difference Between Charges and Convictions

A crucial distinction often disappears in anti-Mormon literature.

Critics frequently list arrests, indictments, or accusations as though they were convictions.

This creates a misleading impression.

Being accused of wrongdoing is not the same thing as being proven guilty.

Joseph Smith faced many allegations.

Relatively few resulted in convictions.

In numerous instances, charges were dismissed.

In other cases, courts ruled in his favor.

Still others ended inconclusively.

This pattern does not prove innocence in every circumstance.

Neither does it support the image of a habitual criminal repeatedly convicted of wrongdoing.

Historical fairness requires distinguishing between accusation and proof.

Unfortunately, critics have not always done so.

The Treasure-Seeking Case Revisited

The 1826 proceeding discussed in the previous chapter is often presented as Joseph Smith's first criminal conviction.

The reality is far less certain.

Records are incomplete.

Accounts conflict.

Historians continue to debate whether Joseph was actually convicted of anything.

Some scholars conclude the proceeding resembled a hearing more than a criminal trial.

Others dispute even that characterization.

What matters here is not resolving every detail.

What matters is recognizing how often the event is exaggerated.

Popular accounts sometimes describe the matter with absolute certainty despite considerable historical ambiguity.

This tendency appears repeatedly throughout discussions of Joseph Smith's legal history.

Debt, Business, and Economic Disputes

Many legal actions involving Joseph Smith concerned financial matters.

The early church frequently struggled economically.

Land purchases, migration, construction projects, and business ventures created obligations.

Credit was common in nineteenth-century America.

When financial difficulties arose, lawsuits often followed.

Critics sometimes interpret these disputes as evidence of dishonesty.

Yet debt alone does not establish fraud.

Thousands of Americans faced similar difficulties during periods of economic instability.

The Panic of 1837 devastated individuals and institutions across the country.

Joseph Smith and many church members suffered alongside countless others.

Financial failure is unfortunate.

It is not necessarily criminal.

Historical analysis must distinguish between economic hardship and deliberate deception.

The Kirtland Safety Society

One of the most controversial financial episodes involved the Kirtland Safety Society.

Established during a period of economic optimism, the institution sought to provide financial assistance and stability for church members.

Instead, broader economic collapse contributed to its failure.

Losses were substantial.

Disappointment was widespread.

Some former members became bitter critics.

Opponents often portray the event as proof of fraud.

The historical record suggests a more complex reality.

Evidence indicates that Joseph Smith genuinely believed the institution could succeed.

Poor judgment and excessive optimism appear more plausible explanations than deliberate deception.

Indeed, if fraud were the objective, one would expect substantial personal enrichment.

The evidence instead suggests that Joseph Smith suffered alongside others when the venture collapsed.

Mistakes occurred.

Fraud remains difficult to establish.

Missouri and Political Prosecution

The Missouri period provides another example of legal controversy.

Following escalating tensions between church members and local residents, state authorities increasingly targeted the Saints.

Joseph Smith and other leaders faced serious charges.

Some accusations involved treason.

Others concerned alleged military activity.

The context, however, was extraordinary.

Violence had erupted.

Political hostility was intense.

Governor Lilburn Boggs issued the Extermination Order.

The Saints were expelled from the state.

Modern historians generally agree that legal proceedings during this period were heavily influenced by political circumstances.

Even scholars critical of Joseph Smith often acknowledge significant irregularities.

The question is not whether conflicts occurred.

The question is whether those conflicts justify portraying Joseph Smith as a common criminal.

The evidence suggests otherwise.

Habeas Corpus and Legal Protection

During the Nauvoo years, Joseph Smith frequently relied upon legal mechanisms such as habeas corpus to challenge arrests and extradition attempts.

Critics sometimes portray this as evidence that he was avoiding justice.

Supporters view it differently.

From their perspective, Joseph Smith had legitimate reason to fear politically motivated prosecution.

Missouri authorities had already demonstrated hostility.

Violence against the Saints remained a serious concern.

Using available legal protections therefore appeared reasonable.

Importantly, habeas corpus existed precisely to prevent unlawful detention.

Invoking legal rights is not itself evidence of guilt.

Indeed, one of the central purposes of constitutional government is protecting individuals from potentially abusive legal actions.

The Question of Treason

One of the most serious accusations leveled against Joseph Smith involved treason.

Such charges arose during both the Missouri and Nauvoo periods.

The word itself carries dramatic implications.

Modern readers naturally associate treason with rebellion against legitimate government.

Yet the historical context again complicates matters.

Many accusations emerged during periods of intense conflict and political hostility.

Evidence often remained disputed.

Supporters argued that Joseph Smith sought self-defense rather than rebellion.

Critics disagreed.

The important point is that treason charges were allegations rather than established facts.

Joseph Smith was never convicted of treason.

This distinction matters.

Joseph Smith and Violence

Another recurring accusation portrays Joseph Smith as a violent individual.

The historical record provides limited support for this characterization.

Like many frontier men, Joseph Smith occasionally participated in physical confrontations.

He lived in a rough environment.

Violence was more common than in many modern settings.

Yet evidence suggests he generally preferred legal and political solutions when possible.

The Saints themselves frequently occupied the role of victims rather than aggressors.

Missouri expulsions, mob attacks, property destruction, and physical assaults all demonstrate that church members often suffered violence rather than initiated it.

This does not mean every action taken by the Saints was wise.

It does challenge simplistic portrayals of Joseph Smith as inherently violent.

The Nauvoo Expositor Affair

Perhaps the most difficult legal issue in Joseph Smith's career concerns the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*.

Unlike many accusations, this event unquestionably occurred.

The city council declared the newspaper a nuisance and ordered its press destroyed.

Critics regard this decision as a clear violation of freedom of the press.

Supporters emphasize nineteenth-century legal precedents concerning public nuisances.

Historical debate continues.

What can be said with confidence is that the decision proved disastrous.

Whether legal or not under contemporary standards, it intensified opposition dramatically.

Joseph Smith's judgment can reasonably be questioned.

Yet poor judgment is not synonymous with criminal intent.

The event reveals the complexities and pressures facing Nauvoo leadership rather than providing definitive proof of villainy.

Why So Many Accusations?

A broader question deserves attention.

Why did Joseph Smith attract so many accusations?

Several factors likely contributed.

First, he was controversial.

Controversial figures naturally generate opponents.

Second, he possessed significant influence.

Influential individuals often become targets.

Third, religious innovation provokes resistance.

Fourth, political involvement increased scrutiny.

Finally, the Saints' rapid growth created fear among some neighbors.

These realities do not prove innocence.

They do help explain why legal conflicts followed Joseph Smith throughout his life.

A founder of an ordinary church might have faced fewer challenges.

Joseph Smith was anything but ordinary.

The Testimony of Neutral Historians

One of the most interesting developments in modern scholarship involves the growing recognition that earlier portrayals of Joseph Smith were often oversimplified.

Many historians who do not accept his prophetic claims nevertheless reject caricatures depicting him as a common criminal.

They acknowledge complexity.

They recognize sincerity.

They note the influence of political and social factors.

This does not mean scholars agree with Restoration theology.

It means the evidence increasingly resists simplistic narratives.

Joseph Smith appears as a complicated religious leader navigating extraordinary circumstances.

Such assessments often align more closely with historical reality than either uncritical devotion or hostile polemic.

The RLDS Perspective

The Reorganized tradition consistently argued that many criminal allegations against Joseph Smith were exaggerated or politically motivated.

RLDS writers emphasized due process, legal context, and the distinction between accusation and conviction.

They did not claim Joseph Smith was perfect.

Rather, they argued that fairness required examining evidence carefully.

This approach remains valuable.

Historical inquiry should neither assume guilt nor innocence.

It should investigate.

When applied to Joseph Smith's legal history, such investigation often reveals a far more nuanced picture than popular criticisms suggest.

Was Joseph Smith Above the Law?

Critics sometimes claim Joseph Smith believed himself above the law.

The evidence does not support such a sweeping conclusion.

He repeatedly appeared before courts.

He submitted to arrest on numerous occasions.

He sought legal remedies for grievances.

He participated actively in political processes.

At the same time, he occasionally challenged authorities he believed were acting unjustly.

This behavior is not unusual.

Many historical figures have appealed to higher principles when confronting perceived injustice.

The question is not whether Joseph Smith respected every legal action taken against him.

The question is whether he fundamentally rejected the rule of law.

The historical record suggests he did not.

Rather, he often believed that law was being applied unfairly.

Whether those beliefs were justified varies from case to case.

Conclusion

The criminal allegations surrounding Joseph Smith form an important part of his historical legacy.

Yet careful examination reveals that many popular claims rest upon exaggeration, misunderstanding, or incomplete analysis.

Joseph Smith faced numerous legal challenges.

Some resulted from his own decisions.

Others emerged from political hostility, economic difficulties, or religious conflict.

The evidence does not support the image of a habitual criminal repeatedly convicted of wrongdoing.

Nor does it portray a flawless leader incapable of error.

Instead, we encounter a complex historical figure operating within a turbulent environment.

This pattern has become familiar.

Again and again, accusations that appear decisive at first glance become far more complicated under scrutiny.

The next major criticism concerns Joseph Smith's leadership style.

Was he a prophet guiding a religious movement?

Or was he a dictator accumulating power?

This question takes us directly into debates about authority, governance, and the nature of leadership within the Restoration.

Chapter 10

Was Joseph Smith a Dictator?

Authority, Leadership, and the Myth of the Mormon Theocracy

Among the most persistent criticisms of Joseph Smith is the accusation that he was a dictator. According to this narrative, Joseph Smith used religion as a means of controlling followers, consolidating power, suppressing dissent, and creating a personal kingdom. Critics point to his positions as prophet, mayor, military leader, and civic organizer as evidence that he sought authority beyond what any religious leader should possess.

The accusation is serious.

If true, it would fundamentally alter how Joseph Smith's life and ministry should be understood.

A dictator seeks power for its own sake.

A dictator suppresses freedom.

A dictator demands unquestioning obedience.

A dictator places personal authority above law, conscience, and community.

The question before us is whether the historical evidence actually supports this portrayal.

As with many issues involving Joseph Smith, the reality proves more complicated than either defenders or critics sometimes admit.

Understanding Authority in the Early Restoration

Modern readers often approach Joseph Smith through contemporary assumptions.

Many live in societies where religion and government are sharply separated.

Religious leaders typically exercise authority only within religious institutions.

Political authority belongs to entirely different structures.

Early nineteenth-century America was not always so neatly divided.

Community leaders frequently occupied multiple roles.

Ministers influenced politics.

Political figures discussed religion.

Civic leadership often overlapped with social and religious leadership.

This context does not eliminate concerns about power.

It does help explain why Joseph Smith held multiple offices without necessarily viewing them as incompatible.

The assumption that any overlap between religious and civic leadership automatically indicates dictatorship reflects modern categories more than nineteenth-century realities.

Joseph Smith's Growing Influence

There is no denying that Joseph Smith became influential.

By the Nauvoo period, thousands of people looked to him for leadership.

His revelations guided church policy.

His sermons shaped theology.

His political opinions affected voting patterns.

His decisions carried significant weight.

Critics often stop the analysis here.

Influence becomes equated with dictatorship.

Yet influence and dictatorship are not the same thing.

Many religious leaders have exercised considerable influence without becoming dictators.

The crucial question concerns how authority was exercised and how followers responded.

Did Joseph Smith rule through coercion?

Or did people follow him voluntarily because they believed in his mission?

Historical evidence strongly favors the latter explanation.

The Voluntary Nature of Membership

One of the strongest arguments against the dictatorship accusation involves the simple fact that people regularly left the movement.

Throughout Joseph Smith's ministry, members joined and departed.

Some became enthusiastic supporters.

Others became critics.

Several prominent leaders left at various points.

Some later returned.

Others did not.

This pattern is difficult to reconcile with the image of total control.

Dictatorships typically prevent dissent through force.

Joseph Smith possessed no such power over most followers.

People remained because they chose to remain.

Indeed, many who left became vocal opponents.

Their ability to do so demonstrates an important reality:

The Restoration was not a closed system from which departure was impossible.

Membership was voluntary.

Leadership by Revelation

Joseph Smith understood his authority primarily in prophetic terms.

He claimed revelation.

He presented himself as a prophet rather than a monarch.

This distinction is important.

Critics sometimes interpret every exercise of authority as evidence of personal ambition.

Yet Joseph Smith generally framed decisions as responses to divine guidance rather than expressions of personal preference.

Skeptics may reject his claims to revelation.

That is their right.

The relevant historical question, however, concerns motivation.

Did Joseph Smith sincerely believe he was receiving revelation?

The available evidence strongly suggests that he did.

Whether one accepts those revelations as genuine is a separate matter.

The accusation of dictatorship implies conscious pursuit of power.

The evidence more often points toward sincere belief in a prophetic mission.

The Council System

Another frequently overlooked aspect of Restoration governance involves councils.

The early church relied heavily upon collective decision-making.

Various councils handled disciplinary matters, administrative questions, missionary assignments, and doctrinal concerns.

Leaders discussed issues together.

Decisions were often reached through consultation.

Joseph Smith participated in these structures rather than simply issuing commands without input.

This does not mean his influence was minimal.

Clearly it was substantial.

Yet substantial influence differs from absolute control.

Historical records reveal numerous instances where discussions, disagreements, and deliberations occurred within church leadership.

Such processes are difficult to reconcile with simplistic images of dictatorship.

Public Sustaining Votes

One of the distinctive features of Restoration governance involved sustaining votes.

Members were regularly asked whether they accepted leaders in their positions.

This practice reflected the belief that authority required communal recognition.

Critics sometimes dismiss sustaining votes as symbolic.

Even so, the practice reveals an important principle.

Leadership was not understood solely as top-down authority.

Community participation mattered.

The concept remains significant within many Restoration traditions today.

A dictator demands obedience.

A community asks for consent.

The difference should not be ignored.

Nauvoo and Political Power

The strongest criticism concerning Joseph Smith's alleged dictatorship often centers upon Nauvoo.

By the early 1840s, Joseph held multiple positions.

He served as mayor.

He commanded the Nauvoo Legion.

He led the church.

He exercised considerable influence within the city.

These facts are undisputed.

The question is how they should be interpreted.

Supporters emphasize context.

The Saints had repeatedly experienced violence and governmental failure.

Missouri authorities had not protected them.

Communities had been destroyed.

Legal rights had been ignored.

Given these experiences, strong local institutions appeared necessary.

Critics respond that good intentions do not eliminate dangers associated with concentrated authority.

This concern deserves consideration.

Yet acknowledging potential dangers is not the same as proving dictatorship.

The historical evidence must still demonstrate coercive rule.

That evidence remains limited.

Religious Liberty in Joseph Smith's Thought

One of the most powerful arguments against the dictatorship accusation comes from Joseph Smith's own statements regarding religious liberty.

Repeatedly he argued that freedom should extend beyond his own followers.

He defended the rights of individuals whose beliefs differed from his own.

He stated that Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and others deserved protection under the law.

Such views were not universal in nineteenth-century America.

These statements do not prove perfect consistency.

No leader perfectly embodies every principle professed.

They do, however, reveal a worldview difficult to reconcile with classic dictatorship.

Dictators typically seek ideological uniformity.

Joseph Smith frequently advocated broader liberty of conscience.

The Question of Dissent

Every movement experiences disagreement.

The Restoration was no exception.

Former members sometimes accused Joseph Smith of authoritarian behavior.

These criticisms deserve attention.

Not every dissenter was dishonest.

Not every complaint was baseless.

Yet context matters.

Many disagreements involved theological disputes, personal conflicts, financial tensions, or competing visions for the movement's future.

The existence of dissent does not automatically prove dictatorship.

Indeed, the very fact that dissenters published newspapers, organized opposition movements, and openly criticized Joseph Smith demonstrates that opposition remained possible.

The *Nauvoo Expositor* controversy remains a major exception and will be addressed separately.

Even there, however, the historical questions are more complex than critics often suggest.

The Nauvoo Expositor Revisited

No defense of Joseph Smith can ignore the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* press.

This event represents one of the strongest pieces of evidence cited by critics.

Freedom of the press is a foundational principle.

Actions against newspapers naturally raise concerns.

Supporters note that nineteenth-century nuisance laws were sometimes applied differently than modern readers assume.

Critics counter that destroying a press violated essential liberties regardless of legal technicalities.

Reasonable historians continue to debate the matter.

What seems clear is that the decision reflected poor judgment.

Whether it demonstrates dictatorship is another question.

A single controversial action does not necessarily define an entire leadership career.

Historical figures should be evaluated within the broader context of their lives.

Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign

The 1844 presidential campaign provides another interesting perspective.

Critics sometimes portray the campaign as evidence of grandiose ambition.

Supporters see it differently.

Joseph Smith's platform addressed issues such as prison reform, religious liberty, economic policy, and slavery.

His proposals reflected genuine concerns regarding national problems.

Importantly, running for president does not itself indicate dictatorship.

Political participation operates within constitutional structures.

Indeed, campaigning for elected office generally assumes respect for democratic processes.

Whether Joseph Smith realistically expected to win is another matter.

The campaign nevertheless suggests engagement with American political ideals rather than rejection of them.

Was Joseph Smith Building a Kingdom?

Some critics argue that Joseph Smith sought to establish a literal kingdom ruled by himself.

The accusation often draws upon statements concerning Zion, gathering, and the Kingdom of God.

The difficulty lies in interpretation.

Religious language concerning God's kingdom appears throughout Christian history.

Many movements have envisioned societies guided by spiritual principles.

The question is whether Joseph Smith intended to overthrow constitutional government and replace it with personal rule.

The evidence for such intentions remains weak.

His writings frequently appealed to constitutional rights.

He sought legal recognition for church institutions.

He participated in elections.

He petitioned governmental authorities.

These actions suggest engagement with existing political structures rather than plans for revolutionary dictatorship.

Why the Dictator Narrative Persists

The accusation persists because Joseph Smith combined characteristics that make modern observers uncomfortable.

He was religious and political.

Charismatic and influential.

Visionary and practical.

Prophetic and administrative.

Modern societies often prefer these roles to remain separate.

Joseph Smith embodied several simultaneously.

This combination naturally raises concerns.

Yet discomfort should not be mistaken for evidence.

Historical analysis requires more than intuition.

The actual record must be examined carefully.

When it is, the dictator narrative appears increasingly difficult to sustain.

The RLDS Perspective

The Reorganized tradition historically rejected portrayals of Joseph Smith as a dictator.

RLDS writers emphasized his commitment to revelation, community governance, and religious liberty.

They also distinguished between Joseph Smith and later Utah developments they believed concentrated authority more heavily.

Whether one accepts that distinction or not, the RLDS perspective highlights an important point:

Joseph Smith's leadership should be evaluated on its own terms rather than through assumptions derived from later controversies.

Historical fairness requires examining the man himself.

Authority Versus Authoritarianism

Perhaps the most useful distinction is between authority and authoritarianism.

Joseph Smith unquestionably possessed authority.

Followers respected him.

His influence was considerable.

His words carried weight.

Yet authority alone does not constitute authoritarianism.

Parents possess authority.

Teachers possess authority.

Religious leaders possess authority.

The question concerns how authority is exercised.

Authoritarianism seeks obedience for its own sake.

Legitimate authority seeks the good of the community.

Reasonable people may disagree regarding particular decisions Joseph Smith made.

The broader pattern, however, suggests a leader attempting to guide a movement he believed divinely established rather than a tyrant pursuing domination.

Conclusion

The accusation that Joseph Smith was a dictator remains one of the most serious criticisms of his leadership.

Yet careful examination reveals significant weaknesses in the claim.

Joseph Smith exercised considerable authority, but authority is not dictatorship.

He influenced followers, but influence is not coercion.

He held multiple offices, but multiple offices do not automatically create tyranny.

The historical record reveals a charismatic and sometimes controversial leader operating within extraordinary circumstances.

It does not clearly reveal a dictator.

As with many accusations against Joseph Smith, the evidence proves more complex than popular narratives suggest.

With this chapter, we conclude our examination of several major allegations concerning Joseph Smith's character and leadership.

The next section turns to one of the most controversial subjects in all Restoration history:

the question of plural marriage.

Did Joseph Smith introduce polygamy?

Did later leaders attribute the practice to him after his death?

What does the historical evidence actually show?

These questions have divided Restoration traditions for generations and remain central to understanding Joseph Smith's legacy.

Part III

Joseph Smith and the Question of Polygamy

Chapter 11

The Origins of the Polygamy Controversy

The Most Contested Question in Restoration History

No subject has divided the descendants of the Restoration more deeply than the question of plural marriage.

For nearly two centuries, historians, believers, critics, and rival Restoration traditions have debated the issue. Entire denominations have formed around different answers. Families have been divided. Reputations have been shaped. Interpretations of Joseph Smith himself often depend upon how one approaches this single question.

If Joseph Smith introduced plural marriage, then many later developments in Utah Mormonism can be traced directly to him.

If he did not introduce plural marriage, then one of the defining features of nineteenth-century Mormonism emerged after his death and was later attributed to him.

The stakes are therefore enormous.

Unlike many other historical questions, this debate affects not only Joseph Smith's character but also the legitimacy of competing Restoration traditions.

For the Utah tradition, Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage is generally regarded as established fact.

For much of RLDS history, Joseph Smith's involvement was denied, challenged, or regarded as unproven.

This chapter does not attempt to settle the entire debate immediately.

Rather, it seeks to explain how the controversy emerged and why it remains so contentious.

Why the Issue Matters So Much

Many controversies concerning Joseph Smith involve questions of interpretation.

Plural marriage involves something more direct.

The issue concerns actions.

Either Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage or he did not.

Either he introduced the principle or someone else did.

The answer has profound implications.

If Joseph Smith secretly practiced plural marriage while publicly denying it, critics argue that serious questions arise concerning honesty and leadership.

If he did not practice plural marriage, then later claims linking him to the practice require careful reexamination.

For the Reorganized tradition, the issue became especially important because Joseph Smith III, the Prophet's son, firmly rejected the notion that his father had instituted polygamy.

Generations of RLDS members therefore viewed the matter not merely as a historical dispute but as a defense of Joseph Smith's character.

Public Teachings Against Polygamy

One of the strongest arguments historically advanced by RLDS writers concerns Joseph Smith's public opposition to plural marriage.

During his lifetime, official church publications repeatedly condemned polygamy.

The 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants included a statement affirming monogamy.

Church newspapers published denials of plural marriage accusations.

Joseph Smith himself publicly rejected charges that the church practiced polygamy.

These facts are not seriously disputed.

The question concerns how they should be interpreted.

Critics argue that public denials concealed private practices.

Traditional RLDS writers argued that the denials reflected reality.

The disagreement therefore centers not upon whether denials occurred but upon whether they were truthful.

Early Rumors and Accusations

Accusations concerning plural marriage did not suddenly appear after Joseph Smith's death.

Rumors circulated during the Nauvoo period.

Dissidents alleged secret teachings.

Opponents published claims regarding unconventional marriage practices.

The *Nauvoo Expositor* famously included such accusations among its criticisms.

Supporters of Joseph Smith often responded by denying the charges.

This creates one of the central tensions in the historical record.

On one side stand public denials.

On the other stand allegations that secret practices existed.

Determining which sources deserve greater confidence remains a matter of debate.

The Problem of Late Testimony

Much of the evidence traditionally used to connect Joseph Smith to plural marriage comes from testimonies recorded years or even decades after his death.

This fact does not automatically invalidate such testimony.

Historical memory can preserve important information.

At the same time, historians recognize potential difficulties.

Memories change.

Details become confused.

Later experiences influence recollection.

Institutional loyalties shape interpretation.

The passage of time affects reliability.

These concerns became central to RLDS arguments.

Reorganized writers frequently emphasized the lateness of many testimonies and questioned whether they should outweigh contemporary denials.

The issue remains significant today.

Historical evidence must always be weighed carefully, especially when recollections emerge long after the events being described.

Brigham Young and Public Polygamy

One fact is beyond dispute.

Plural marriage became publicly established under the leadership of Brigham Young and the Utah church.

The practice was openly announced in 1852.

It became a defining feature of Utah Mormonism.

Church leaders defended it vigorously.

Thousands participated.

Government opposition intensified.

National controversy followed.

This historical reality shaped perceptions of Joseph Smith.

Once plural marriage became publicly associated with Mormonism, many naturally assumed it originated with the movement's founder.

The question, however, is whether that assumption is justified.

The existence of plural marriage in Utah does not by itself prove Joseph Smith's involvement.

Independent evidence remains necessary.

The RLDS Position

For much of its history, the RLDS Church maintained that Joseph Smith neither taught nor practiced plural marriage.

This position rested upon several arguments.

First, Joseph Smith publicly denied involvement.

Second, Emma Smith consistently denied that her husband practiced plural marriage.

Third, official church documents condemned polygamy.

Fourth, many testimonies connecting Joseph Smith to the practice emerged only after his death.

Fifth, RLDS leaders argued that Brigham Young possessed both motive and opportunity to attribute the practice retroactively to Joseph Smith.

These arguments formed the foundation of the traditional Reorganized case.

Whether one finds them persuasive or not, they deserve serious consideration.

Too often they have been dismissed without adequate examination.

Emma Smith's Testimony

Emma Smith occupies a unique position in this controversy.

As Joseph Smith's wife, she stood closer to the issue than almost anyone else.

Throughout her life she repeatedly denied that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

Her testimony became a cornerstone of the RLDS position.

Critics respond that Emma possessed reasons to deny the practice even if it occurred.

They point to family tensions, theological disagreements, and personal concerns.

Supporters counter that Emma's proximity to Joseph Smith gives her testimony extraordinary weight.

The debate remains unresolved.

What cannot be denied is Emma's importance.

Any serious discussion of plural marriage must grapple with her statements.

Ignoring them would be historically irresponsible.

Joseph Smith III and the Reorganization

The position of Joseph Smith III deserves special attention.

Unlike later generations, he personally knew many individuals involved in the Nauvoo period.

He conducted investigations.

He interviewed witnesses.

He examined documents.

After considerable effort, he concluded that his father had not instituted plural marriage.

His conviction shaped the identity of the Reorganized Church for generations.

Critics argue that filial loyalty influenced his judgment.

Perhaps it did.

Yet loyalty alone does not explain the extensive research conducted by RLDS leaders.

The Reorganization developed a substantial historical case rather than relying solely upon sentiment.

Whether that case ultimately succeeds remains a matter of interpretation.

The important point is that it existed and deserves examination.

The Question of Secret Teachings

Advocates of Joseph Smith's involvement often argue that plural marriage was taught secretly to select individuals while being denied publicly.

This explanation seeks to reconcile conflicting evidence.

Public denials remain genuine historical facts.

Private teachings supposedly account for later testimonies.

The theory possesses explanatory power.

At the same time, it creates difficulties.

The more secrecy one proposes, the more challenging verification becomes.

Historians must rely upon witness testimony rather than public documentation.

Questions of reliability therefore become increasingly important.

The issue is not whether secret teachings are possible.

History contains many examples.

The issue is whether sufficient evidence exists to establish them convincingly.

Reasonable scholars continue to disagree.

Historical Method and Fairness

Perhaps more than any other subject in Restoration history, plural marriage demonstrates the importance of historical method.

People often approach the evidence with conclusions already formed.

Supporters of Utah traditions may assume Joseph Smith's involvement from the outset.

Supporters of RLDS traditions may assume his innocence.

Neither approach is ideal.

Historical inquiry requires patience.

Sources must be examined.

Context must be considered.

Contradictions must be acknowledged.

Certainty should not exceed evidence.

This book approaches the issue from a Restorationist perspective sympathetic to the traditional RLDS defense of Joseph Smith while recognizing that the historical record remains complex and contested.

Such complexity should not be feared.

Truth has nothing to lose from careful investigation.

Why the Debate Continues

If the evidence were entirely clear, the debate would have ended long ago.

The fact that it persists suggests genuine complexity.

Both sides possess evidence.

Both sides face difficulties.

Both sides can point to witnesses, documents, and historical circumstances supporting their interpretations.

This reality should encourage humility.

Historical certainty is sometimes more elusive than partisans on either side admit.

What matters is not winning an argument but seeking the most accurate understanding possible.

The Character Question

Ultimately, the plural marriage debate involves more than marriage.

It involves character.

Was Joseph Smith the type of man who would publicly deny practices he secretly endorsed?

Was he capable of maintaining such a deception for years?

Did later leaders have reasons to attribute controversial practices to him?

These questions cannot be answered merely by counting documents.

They require broader consideration of Joseph Smith's life, behavior, and relationships.

The chapters that follow will explore these matters in greater detail.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding plural marriage stands at the center of competing Restoration narratives.

The Utah tradition generally views Joseph Smith as the originator of the practice.

The historic RLDS tradition viewed him as innocent of it.

Between these positions lies a vast body of evidence, testimony, interpretation, and debate.

Understanding the origins of the controversy is only the first step.

The next chapter will examine the Reorganized Church's rejection of polygamy in greater depth and explore the historical arguments developed by Joseph Smith III and other RLDS leaders in defense of the Prophet.

Only then can we begin evaluating whether the traditional RLDS case succeeds.

Chapter 12

The Reorganization's Rejection of Polygamy

Joseph Smith III, the RLDS Church, and the Defense of the Prophet

When Joseph Smith was killed at Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844, he left behind more than a grieving church. He left behind an unresolved question of authority. Who would lead the movement? Who would preserve his teachings? Who would inherit his mission?

The answer given by the Utah church and the answer given by the Reorganization were dramatically different.

For the followers of Brigham Young, authority rested with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and ultimately with Brigham Young himself.

For the Reorganized Church, authority eventually rested with Joseph Smith III, the eldest surviving son of the Prophet.

This difference affected nearly every aspect of Restoration history.

Most importantly for our present discussion, it shaped radically different interpretations of plural marriage.

The Utah church accepted polygamy as a divine principle introduced by Joseph Smith.

The Reorganized Church rejected that claim entirely.

For more than a century, the defense of Joseph Smith against accusations of polygamy became one of the defining features of RLDS identity.

To understand the traditional Restorationist defense of Joseph Smith, we must understand how and why the Reorganization rejected plural marriage.

The Position of Emma Smith

Any discussion of the RLDS position must begin with Emma Hale Smith.

Following Joseph Smith's death, Emma did not accompany the Saints west.

She remained in Illinois.

She rejected the leadership claims of Brigham Young.

More importantly, she consistently denied that her husband had taught or practiced plural marriage.

Throughout her life, Emma repeated this denial.

She did so publicly.

She did so privately.

She did so when speaking to family members.

She did so when speaking to church leaders.

For the Reorganization, this testimony carried enormous weight.

Emma was not a distant observer.

She was Joseph Smith's wife.

She shared his home.

She participated in the development of the early church.

She witnessed events that outsiders could only speculate about.

RLDS defenders therefore asked a simple question:

If Joseph Smith had secretly practiced plural marriage, how could Emma have remained unaware?

And if she knew about it, why did she deny it repeatedly throughout her life?

These questions became central to the Reorganized case.

The Rise of Joseph Smith III

For several years after Joseph Smith's death, no unified Reorganized movement existed.

Various groups emerged.

Different leaders advanced competing claims.

The Restoration remained fragmented.

Eventually attention turned toward Joseph Smith III.

Many believers felt that leadership should remain within the Prophet's family.

Others viewed Joseph Smith III as the natural heir to his father's mission.

In 1860, he formally accepted leadership of the Reorganized Church.

His presidency would shape the movement for decades.

One of his major concerns involved defending his father's reputation.

Among the issues demanding attention, none seemed more important than plural marriage.

Joseph Smith III firmly believed that his father had not introduced the practice.

This conviction became a driving force behind extensive historical investigation.

The RLDS Historical Project

Modern readers sometimes assume that the RLDS rejection of polygamy rested entirely upon emotion or family loyalty.

Certainly emotional factors existed.

Joseph Smith III loved and respected his father.

Emma defended her husband.

Family reputation mattered.

Yet reducing the RLDS position to sentiment oversimplifies the historical reality.

The Reorganization invested enormous effort into research.

Leaders gathered documents.

They interviewed witnesses.

They examined records.

They published arguments.

They debated Utah representatives.

They sought evidence wherever it could be found.

This work continued for generations.

Whether one ultimately agrees with their conclusions is secondary.

The important point is that the Reorganized position emerged from sustained historical inquiry rather than mere denial.

The Public Record

One of the strongest pillars of the RLDS argument involved the public record itself.

During Joseph Smith's lifetime, official church documents repeatedly condemned polygamy.

The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants explicitly endorsed monogamy.

Church publications denied accusations of plural marriage.

Joseph Smith himself issued statements rejecting such allegations.

These facts created a significant challenge for proponents of Joseph Smith's involvement.

If Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage, then his public statements require explanation.

Advocates of traditional Utah history generally respond by arguing that secrecy was necessary.

The RLDS response was straightforward:

The simplest explanation is that Joseph Smith told the truth.

This argument appealed to many Restorationists because it required fewer assumptions.

Rather than proposing secret systems hidden behind public denials, it accepted contemporary statements at face value.

The Problem of Retrospective Testimony

The Reorganization consistently emphasized the timing of much pro-polygamy evidence.

Many important testimonies linking Joseph Smith to plural marriage were recorded years after his death.

Some appeared decades later.

RLDS historians argued that this fact mattered enormously.

Human memory is imperfect.

People reinterpret past events.

Later developments influence recollections.

Institutional loyalty shapes testimony.

The passage of time affects accuracy.

These concerns were not invented by RLDS writers.

They are recognized principles of historical method.

The Reorganized argument therefore maintained that contemporary denials should generally carry greater weight than recollections recorded long afterward.

Whether one agrees depends largely upon how one evaluates competing sources.

Yet the argument itself remains historically reasonable.

The Influence of Brigham Young

A major element of the traditional RLDS case involved suspicion toward Brigham Young and the Utah leadership.

The Reorganization argued that plural marriage became firmly established only after Joseph Smith's death.

From this perspective, Brigham Young and others introduced the practice and later attributed it to Joseph Smith in order to legitimize it.

Critics of the RLDS position often dismiss this possibility.

Yet from the standpoint of nineteenth-century Reorganized believers, the theory seemed plausible.

After all, public polygamy unquestionably emerged under Brigham Young.

Utah leaders openly defended the practice.

The question was whether they inherited it or created it.

The Reorganization believed the latter.

This conviction shaped Restoration debates for generations.

The Character Argument

Historical discussions of plural marriage often focus upon documents and testimonies.

The RLDS tradition emphasized character as well.

Reorganized writers argued that Joseph Smith's life and public teachings were inconsistent with the image presented by plural marriage allegations.

They pointed to his repeated denials.

They emphasized his concern for family.

They highlighted his public defense of monogamy.

The underlying argument was simple:

The Joseph Smith revealed by contemporary evidence does not resemble the Joseph Smith required by later polygamy narratives.

Whether this argument succeeds depends upon broader judgments regarding Joseph Smith's character.

Yet it remains an important part of the historical discussion.

Debates Between RLDS and Utah Defenders

Throughout the nineteenth century, public debates frequently occurred between representatives of the Reorganization and the Utah church.

Plural marriage occupied a central place in these exchanges.

Both sides claimed to possess historical evidence.

Both accused the other of distorting Joseph Smith's legacy.

These debates helped preserve alternative interpretations of Restoration history.

Without them, the Utah narrative might have become virtually uncontested.

The Reorganization ensured that another voice remained present.

This contribution should not be underestimated.

Even historians who disagree with RLDS conclusions often acknowledge that Reorganized scholarship forced important questions into the open.

Joseph Smith III's Personal Conviction

For Joseph Smith III, the issue was not merely academic.

It was personal.

He believed he knew his father.

He trusted his mother's testimony.

He examined available evidence.

After decades of study, he remained unconvinced that Joseph Smith had practiced plural marriage.

Critics sometimes dismiss this conviction as filial bias.

Certainly personal loyalty influenced him.

Yet loyalty alone does not explain the persistence of his position.

Joseph Smith III spent much of his life investigating the matter.

He had opportunities to change his mind.

He did not.

Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, his sincerity is difficult to doubt.

The Strengths of the RLDS Case

The traditional Reorganized argument possesses several notable strengths.

First, it relies heavily upon contemporary public evidence.

Second, it takes Joseph Smith's denials seriously.

Third, it emphasizes Emma Smith's testimony.

Fourth, it recognizes the difficulties associated with late recollections.

Fifth, it highlights the historical reality that public polygamy emerged under Brigham Young rather than Joseph Smith.

These points remain worthy of consideration.

Even scholars who ultimately conclude that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage often acknowledge that the RLDS position raises legitimate questions.

The Weaknesses of the RLDS Case

Historical fairness requires acknowledging challenges as well.

Numerous witnesses eventually testified that Joseph Smith taught or practiced plural marriage.

Some claimed direct personal involvement.

Others described conversations or ceremonies.

These testimonies cannot simply be ignored.

The existence of such evidence presents a significant challenge to the traditional RLDS position.

Consequently, the debate cannot be resolved merely by appealing to Emma Smith or public denials.

Both sides possess evidence requiring explanation.

Recognizing this complexity strengthens rather than weakens historical inquiry.

Truth is rarely served by ignoring inconvenient facts.

A Restorationist Approach

A Restorationist defense of Joseph Smith need not depend upon certainty regarding every historical detail.

It is possible to recognize the complexity of the evidence while still maintaining that the case against Joseph Smith remains less decisive than many assume.

The traditional RLDS position reminds us that historical debates should remain open where evidence remains contested.

Too often discussions of plural marriage proceed as though all questions have been settled.

The continued existence of serious scholarly disagreement suggests otherwise.

Why This Matters Today

Some readers may wonder why the debate remains important.

After all, the nineteenth century is long past.

Plural marriage is no longer practiced by most Restoration traditions.

Why revisit old controversies?

The answer lies in Joseph Smith's legacy.

How one understands the Prophet often depends upon how one understands plural marriage.

If Joseph Smith introduced the practice, then it becomes part of his historical identity.

If he did not, then one of the most controversial features of Mormon history originated elsewhere.

The implications are profound.

Conclusion

The Reorganized Church's rejection of polygamy became one of the defining features of its identity.

Through the leadership of Joseph Smith III, the testimony of Emma Smith, and decades of historical investigation, the

RLDS tradition developed a substantial case in defense of the Prophet.

Whether one ultimately accepts that case remains a matter of interpretation.

What cannot be denied is that it deserves serious consideration.

The debate is more complex than popular narratives often suggest.

In the next chapter, we will examine the specific evidence traditionally cited by RLDS writers against Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage and explore why many Restorationists concluded that the accusations against him remained unproven.

Chapter 13

Evidence Against Joseph Smith's Practice of Polygamy

Documents, Testimonies, and Historical Challenges

The question before us is not whether plural marriage existed in nineteenth-century Mormonism. That fact is beyond dispute.

The question is whether Joseph Smith himself introduced and practiced it.

For many modern historians, the answer appears settled. They conclude that Joseph Smith both taught and practiced plural marriage during the Nauvoo period.

The historic RLDS tradition reached a different conclusion.

Rather than accepting the case as proven, Reorganized writers argued that the evidence contained serious weaknesses, contradictions, and unresolved problems.

This chapter examines the principal arguments traditionally advanced in defense of Joseph Smith.

The goal is not to ignore evidence that points in the opposite direction.

Rather, it is to understand why generations of Restorationists remained unconvinced by the accusations.

Historical fairness requires hearing both sides.

The Burden of Proof

One of the central principles emphasized by RLDS historians was the burden of proof.

Joseph Smith repeatedly denied practicing plural marriage.

Official church publications condemned it.

The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants endorsed monogamy.

Emma Smith denied that her husband practiced it.

Given these facts, Reorganized writers argued that the burden rested upon those claiming Joseph Smith secretly taught the opposite.

The issue was not whether evidence existed.

Clearly it did.

The issue was whether that evidence was strong enough to overturn contemporary denials.

RLDS defenders believed it was not.

This distinction is important.

They did not necessarily claim every witness was lying.

Rather, they argued that the totality of evidence remained insufficiently convincing.

Contemporary Evidence Versus Later Evidence

A major feature of the RLDS case involved chronology.

Historians generally prefer sources closest in time to the events being described.

Contemporary documents often carry greater evidentiary value than recollections recorded decades later.

Applying this principle, Reorganized writers emphasized:

- Public statements made during Joseph Smith's lifetime.
- Contemporary church publications.
- Official records.

- Immediate testimony from individuals close to events.

In contrast, much evidence linking Joseph Smith to plural marriage emerged years after his death.

This does not automatically invalidate such testimony.

Yet it raises important questions.

Memory changes.

Narratives evolve.

Institutional pressures influence recollections.

These realities do not prove inaccuracy.

They simply require caution.

Emma Smith's Continuing Testimony

Among all witnesses, Emma Smith occupied a uniquely important position.

As Joseph Smith's wife, she would presumably possess direct knowledge of his marital practices.

Throughout her life, she denied that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

Her statements were neither isolated nor ambiguous.

They were repeated consistently.

RLDS writers regarded this testimony as enormously significant.

Critics respond that Emma possessed motives for denial.

They point to her disagreements with Brigham Young.

They suggest emotional reasons.

They argue that family reputation was involved.

Such possibilities deserve consideration.

Yet motive cuts both ways.

Supporters of plural marriage narratives also possessed motives.

Utah leaders had strong reasons to connect the practice to Joseph Smith.

Consequently, historical inquiry cannot simply dismiss Emma's testimony because motives may have existed.

Every witness brings biases.

The question is whether Emma's proximity to events outweighs potential reasons for denial.

For many RLDS defenders, the answer was yes.

The Problem of Affidavits

A substantial portion of pro-polygamy evidence comes from affidavits collected years after Joseph Smith's death.

These statements often describe marriages, ceremonies, teachings, or conversations allegedly occurring in Nauvoo.

RLDS historians frequently challenged the reliability of such affidavits.

Several concerns were raised.

First, many were recorded decades later.

Second, some accounts contained inconsistencies.

Third, details occasionally conflicted with contemporary records.

Fourth, witnesses sometimes remembered events differently over time.

The existence of these difficulties does not prove the affidavits false.

Yet RLDS writers argued that they prevented unquestioning acceptance.

Historical evidence must be weighed rather than merely counted.

Ten weak testimonies do not automatically outweigh one strong contemporary source.

Quality matters as much as quantity.

Public Denials by Joseph Smith

Perhaps the strongest evidence traditionally cited by the Reorganization consisted of Joseph Smith's own statements.

Throughout the Nauvoo period, he publicly denied practicing plural marriage.

Church newspapers published similar denials.

Leaders condemned accusations.

Official declarations affirmed monogamy.

These facts create a dilemma.

If Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage, then his public statements require explanation.

Advocates of the traditional Utah position generally argue that secrecy was necessary and that public denials served protective purposes.

The RLDS response was straightforward.

The simplest explanation is often the most natural one:

Joseph Smith denied practicing plural marriage because he was not practicing plural marriage.

Whether one accepts this conclusion depends upon broader assumptions regarding Joseph Smith's character.

The issue ultimately becomes inseparable from questions of honesty and integrity.

The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants

The marriage statement included in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants became a cornerstone of the RLDS argument.

It declared that one man should have one wife and one woman should have one husband.

The statement appeared in an official church publication during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

Reorganized defenders viewed it as powerful evidence.

If Joseph Smith was secretly introducing plural marriage, why would such a statement remain in force?

Critics answer that public doctrine did not necessarily reflect private practice.

The RLDS response again emphasized simplicity.

The document says what it appears to say.

No elaborate theory is required.

The church officially taught monogamy because it believed in monogamy.

The Nauvoo Expositor Question

The *Nauvoo Expositor* occupies an unusual place in the debate.

The newspaper accused Joseph Smith of various secret activities, including unconventional marriage practices.

Supporters of Joseph Smith note that the paper came from dissidents hostile to church leadership.

Critics argue that hostility does not automatically make accusations false.

The RLDS position generally acknowledged this complexity.

Yet Reorganized writers emphasized an important point:

Accusations are not evidence merely because they were printed.

The *Expositor* proves that allegations existed.

It does not by itself prove their truthfulness.

Historical investigation requires more than repeating claims.

Independent corroboration remains necessary.

The Absence of Children Argument

Another argument occasionally advanced by RLDS defenders concerned offspring.

If Joseph Smith practiced extensive plural marriage, one might expect a significant number of children from those unions.

Historically, evidence for such descendants remained limited.

This observation does not disprove plural marriage.

Not all marriages produce children.

Some relationships may have been non-sexual.

Nevertheless, RLDS writers viewed the absence of widely recognized offspring as a point worth noting.

The argument was rarely presented as decisive.

Rather, it functioned as one piece of a broader cumulative case.

The Character of Joseph Smith

For many Restorationists, the evidence could not be separated from character.

The historical Joseph Smith repeatedly preached morality, family responsibility, and Christian conduct.

He publicly condemned spiritual wifery and similar practices.

He denied accusations concerning plural marriage.

Supporters therefore asked:

Which is more likely?

That Joseph Smith consistently lied while maintaining an elaborate secret system?

Or that later generations misattributed controversial practices to him?

The answer depends partly upon one's assessment of Joseph Smith as a person.

Historical evidence does not interpret itself.

Character judgments inevitably play a role.

Could Later Developments Influence Memory?

The RLDS tradition frequently argued that later developments in Utah influenced retrospective testimony.

Once plural marriage became publicly established and widely accepted among Utah Saints, memories of Nauvoo could be reinterpreted through a new lens.

This possibility deserves consideration.

Historians recognize that present beliefs often shape recollections of the past.

People unconsciously reorganize memories to fit later understandings.

Such processes occur throughout human experience.

The question is not whether every witness deliberately altered history.

The question is whether later institutional developments may have affected how earlier events were remembered.

RLDS historians believed the answer was yes.

What Modern Historians Say

Historical scholarship today is diverse.

Many historians conclude that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

Others acknowledge greater uncertainty.

Even scholars accepting Joseph Smith's involvement often recognize weaknesses in portions of the evidence.

The important point is that the debate is not as simplistic as popular presentations sometimes suggest.

The historical record contains tensions.

Contemporary denials exist.

Late testimonies exist.

Conflicting interpretations exist.

The RLDS position emerged from genuine engagement with these complexities rather than from mere refusal to examine evidence.

A Restorationist Reading

From a Restorationist perspective sympathetic to the historic RLDS tradition, several conclusions remain possible.

One may conclude that the evidence against Joseph Smith is weaker than commonly assumed.

One may believe contemporary denials deserve greater weight.

One may regard Emma Smith's testimony as particularly significant.

One may remain unconvinced that the burden of proof has been met.

Such positions are historically defensible even if not universally accepted.

The existence of disagreement among serious scholars demonstrates that the matter cannot simply be settled by assertion.

The Limits of Historical Certainty

One lesson emerges repeatedly throughout this debate:

Historical certainty has limits.

Many participants on both sides speak with confidence exceeding the available evidence.

The reality is more complicated.

Documents are incomplete.

Witnesses disagree.

Memories conflict.

Interpretations vary.

Recognizing these limitations is not weakness.

It is honesty.

A responsible historian follows evidence as far as it goes and avoids claiming more than can reasonably be supported.

Why the RLDS Defense Endures

The traditional RLDS defense of Joseph Smith endures because it addresses genuine questions.

It takes contemporary evidence seriously.

It challenges assumptions.

It reminds readers that historical narratives should not be accepted merely because they become popular.

Whether one ultimately accepts the defense or not, it serves an important purpose.

It keeps inquiry alive.

It prevents premature certainty.

It insists that Joseph Smith deserves a fair hearing.

Conclusion

The evidence against Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage remains one of the most debated subjects in Restoration history.

The historic RLDS tradition developed a substantial case emphasizing public denials, Emma Smith's testimony, official church documents, and the difficulties associated with retrospective evidence.

Many historians reach different conclusions.

Yet the Reorganized position cannot simply be dismissed as ignorance or denial.

It represents a serious historical interpretation grounded in evidence and sustained by generations of investigation.

The next chapter turns from defending Joseph Smith against accusations of polygamy to examining the rise of plural marriage in Utah under Brigham Young and asking a different question:

How did a practice publicly condemned in early Restoration history become one of the defining features of Utah Mormonism?

Chapter 14

The Rise of Brighamite Polygamy

Brigham Young, Utah, and the Transformation of Mormonism

For the historic Reorganized Church, the question of polygamy was never merely about marriage. It was about succession, authority, and the identity of the Restoration itself.

If Joseph Smith did not introduce plural marriage, then one of the most distinctive features of nineteenth-century Mormonism originated after his death.

If that were true, then the movement led by Brigham Young would represent not merely a continuation of Joseph Smith's work but a significant transformation of it.

This conviction became a central element of RLDS historical interpretation.

The Reorganization argued that Utah Mormonism preserved some aspects of Joseph Smith's legacy while simultaneously introducing doctrines and practices foreign to the original Restoration.

Among those developments, none was considered more significant than plural marriage.

To understand the traditional Restorationist critique of Brigham Young, we must examine how plural marriage emerged publicly, how it shaped Utah society, and why the Reorganization regarded it as evidence of theological departure.

The Succession Crisis Revisited

When Joseph Smith died in June 1844, no universally accepted succession plan existed.

Different leaders advanced competing claims.

Some supported Sidney Rigdon.

Others followed James Strang.

Still others looked toward Joseph Smith's family.

The largest group eventually accepted the leadership of Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve.

From the perspective of the Reorganization, this moment was decisive.

The question was not simply who inherited leadership.

The question was who preserved Joseph Smith's teachings.

RLDS writers argued that leadership and doctrine could not be separated.

A change in authority often leads to a change in theology.

Consequently, later developments under Brigham Young became important evidence in evaluating succession claims.

The Westward Migration

Under Brigham Young's leadership, thousands of Saints migrated westward into the Great Basin.

The migration remains one of the most remarkable episodes in American religious history.

The hardships were immense.

Families crossed vast distances.

Resources were limited.

Danger was constant.

The determination displayed by these pioneers deserves genuine respect.

The Reorganization generally acknowledged this.

RLDS criticism of Brigham Young did not require denying the courage or sacrifice of Utah pioneers.

Indeed, many Reorganized writers admired their perseverance while simultaneously questioning the doctrines that later emerged.

Historical fairness requires both recognition and critique.

One may respect the achievements of a people without accepting every aspect of their theology.

Public Announcement of Polygamy

One fact remains beyond dispute:

Plural marriage became publicly established under Brigham Young's leadership.

In 1852, church leaders openly announced and defended the practice.

The announcement shocked much of the United States.

For years rumors had circulated.

Now confirmation had arrived.

The reaction was immediate.

Newspapers condemned the practice.

Politicians denounced it.

Religious leaders attacked it.

Many Americans regarded it as fundamentally incompatible with Christian civilization.

The controversy transformed public perceptions of Mormonism.

From that point forward, plural marriage became inseparable from the Utah church in the popular imagination.

The Reorganization viewed this development differently.

Rather than seeing public announcement as disclosure of an older principle, RLDS writers often regarded it as evidence that a new doctrine had emerged.

The RLDS Argument

The traditional RLDS argument followed a relatively straightforward line of reasoning.

First, Joseph Smith publicly condemned polygamy.

Second, the early church officially endorsed monogamy.

Third, Emma Smith denied Joseph's involvement.

Fourth, public plural marriage appeared only after Joseph Smith's death.

Fifth, Brigham Young became its principal defender.

Therefore, the simplest explanation was that Brigham Young introduced the practice and subsequently attributed it to Joseph Smith.

Whether one accepts this conclusion is another matter.

The important point is that the argument possessed internal coherence.

It was not merely an emotional reaction.

It represented a historical interpretation built upon specific premises.

Utah Mormonism as a Distinct Development

One of the defining characteristics of RLDS thought involved distinguishing Joseph Smith from later Utah developments.

Plural marriage was only one example.

Reorganized writers also criticized other teachings associated with Brigham Young.

Among these were:

- Adam-God theology.
- Blood atonement teachings.
- Racial priesthood restrictions.
- Certain forms of speculative theology.
- The increasing concentration of ecclesiastical authority.

The cumulative effect of these developments convinced many RLDS members that Utah Mormonism had diverged significantly from the original Restoration.

Whether this assessment is entirely fair remains debated.

Yet it helps explain why plural marriage occupied such a central role in RLDS identity.

For the Reorganization, polygamy symbolized a broader theological departure.

The Social Effects of Plural Marriage

The practice itself had profound consequences within Utah society.

Families were structured differently.

Community life adapted to new realities.

Religious justifications were developed.

Defenders regarded plural marriage as a divine commandment requiring sacrifice and obedience.

Critics saw it as a distortion of Christian marriage.

The Reorganization generally aligned with the latter view.

RLDS writers frequently argued that monogamy reflected both biblical teaching and Joseph Smith's original vision.

Consequently, they interpreted Utah polygamy not as restoration but as innovation.

This distinction became fundamental.

Brigham Young's Defense of Polygamy

Brigham Young defended plural marriage vigorously.

He regarded it as divinely authorized.

He taught that Joseph Smith had introduced the principle.

He encouraged faithful Saints to accept it despite public opposition.

These facts are historically significant.

Brigham Young did not treat plural marriage as a minor issue.

He regarded it as an important component of the faith.

This commitment strengthened RLDS suspicions.

From their perspective, Brigham Young appeared not merely to practice polygamy but to build an entire theological system around it.

Such developments seemed increasingly distant from the early church known to Joseph Smith III and Emma Smith.

The Question of Motivation

Why would Brigham Young attribute plural marriage to Joseph Smith if Joseph had not practiced it?

Traditional RLDS writers proposed several possibilities.

Some argued that genuine conviction was involved.

Brigham Young may have sincerely believed he was preserving teachings received from Joseph Smith.

Others suggested institutional motives.

Connecting controversial practices to the founding prophet strengthened legitimacy.

Still others emphasized the complexities of memory and oral transmission.

Importantly, the RLDS position did not always require conscious deception.

A person can sincerely believe something historically inaccurate.

The issue was not necessarily fraud.

The issue was historical reliability.

Federal Opposition

As the nineteenth century progressed, opposition to plural marriage intensified.

The United States government enacted legislation targeting the practice.

Court battles followed.

Federal pressure increased.

Church leaders faced prosecution.

Many Utah Saints suffered significant hardships.

These events are important because they demonstrate the depth of commitment many believers felt toward plural marriage.

People rarely endure persecution for practices they regard as insignificant.

This observation cuts both ways.

For supporters of the Utah tradition, such sacrifice supports sincerity.

For RLDS critics, sincerity does not prove correctness.

Individuals can be deeply committed to beliefs that originated through misunderstanding.

Historical truth and personal devotion are not always identical.

The Manifesto and the End of Official Polygamy

In 1890, church president Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto that effectively ended official church support for new plural marriages.

The decision marked a turning point.

After decades of defending the practice as divinely mandated, church leadership moved away from it.

For RLDS observers, the development seemed revealing.

If plural marriage truly represented an eternal principle restored through Joseph Smith, why abandon it?

Utah defenders offered explanations involving revelation and changing circumstances.

The Reorganization saw matters differently.

The abandonment of plural marriage appeared consistent with the argument that it had never belonged to the original Restoration.

The debate continued.

Was Utah Mormonism a Different Religion?

Some early RLDS writers occasionally spoke as though Utah Mormonism had become almost a different religion.

Such language reflected strong emotions and denominational rivalry.

Modern historians often prefer more nuanced descriptions.

Clearly both traditions shared common origins.

Both revered Joseph Smith.

Both accepted the Book of Mormon.

Both embraced continuing revelation.

At the same time, important differences existed.

The question is not whether Utah Mormonism and RLDS Restorationism shared roots.

They unquestionably did.

The question is how far those branches diverged after 1844.

Plural marriage became one of the most visible symbols of that divergence.

A Restorationist Critique of Brigham Young

From a Restorationist perspective rooted in the historic RLDS tradition, Brigham Young appears as a complex figure.

He was courageous.

He was capable.

He successfully led a massive migration.

He preserved and expanded a religious movement under difficult circumstances.

These achievements deserve recognition.

Yet admiration need not imply agreement.

The Reorganization argued that Brigham Young also introduced significant doctrinal changes.

Plural marriage stood at the center of those changes.

Consequently, RLDS criticism focused less upon Brigham Young's character than upon his theology.

The issue was continuity.

Did he preserve Joseph Smith's teachings or transform them?

The Reorganization answered that question with increasing confidence as the nineteenth century progressed.

The Legacy of the Debate

The dispute over polygamy shaped Restoration history profoundly.

It influenced succession claims.

It affected denominational identities.

It shaped public perceptions of Mormonism.

Most importantly, it altered how people understood Joseph Smith himself.

To Utah believers, plural marriage often became evidence of Joseph Smith's prophetic authority.

To RLDS believers, rejection of plural marriage became evidence of faithfulness to Joseph Smith's true legacy.

The same historical question produced opposite conclusions.

This reality illustrates how deeply interpretation matters.

History is rarely just about facts.

It is also about the meaning assigned to those facts.

What Can Be Said with Confidence?

Several conclusions remain reasonably secure.

First, public plural marriage emerged under Brigham Young.

Second, it became a defining feature of Utah Mormonism.

Third, the Reorganized Church consistently rejected it.

Fourth, the debate over Joseph Smith's involvement remains central to competing Restoration narratives.

Beyond these points, certainty becomes more difficult.

Historical evidence remains contested.

Interpretations differ.

Humility therefore remains appropriate.

Conclusion

The rise of Brighamite polygamy transformed both Mormonism and American religious history.

For the Utah tradition, plural marriage represented obedience to divine revelation.

For the Reorganization, it represented a departure from Joseph Smith's original teachings.

This disagreement became one of the defining divisions within the Restoration movement.

With the question of polygamy examined from a traditional RLDS perspective, we now turn to another major controversy that emerged after Joseph Smith's death:

the succession crisis of 1844.

Who possessed the right to lead the church?

Did authority rest with Brigham Young?

With Sidney Rigdon?

With another claimant?

Or with the line of Joseph Smith himself?

The answer to that question would shape every branch of the Restoration that followed.

Chapter 15

The Succession Crisis of 1844

Who Should Lead the Church?

When Joseph Smith was murdered at Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844, the Restoration faced a crisis unlike any it had previously encountered.

The Prophet was dead.

His brother Hyrum, who many regarded as a likely successor, was dead as well.

The movement that had survived persecution, expulsion, poverty, and violence suddenly confronted a question for which no universally accepted answer existed:

Who should lead the Church?

This question would shape the future of the Restoration more profoundly than any other issue after Joseph Smith's death.

It would divide friends.

Separate families.

Create rival churches.

Generate decades of controversy.

Most importantly, it would determine how Joseph Smith's teachings were interpreted.

The succession crisis was not merely about leadership.

It was about authority.

Who possessed the right to speak for the Restoration?

Who represented continuity with Joseph Smith?

Who carried forward the divine mission?

Different answers produced different movements.

The consequences continue to this day.

The Unexpected Nature of the Crisis

One reason the succession crisis proved so difficult is that Joseph Smith's death came suddenly.

Although he had discussed leadership questions on various occasions, he left behind no universally recognized succession document accepted by all parties.

This fact is important.

Later generations often assume the matter should have been obvious.

It was not.

Different leaders could point to different precedents.

Different revelations could be interpreted in different ways.

Different memories of Joseph Smith's intentions existed.

The result was uncertainty.

The Restoration movement had grown rapidly under Joseph Smith's charismatic leadership.

Now it faced the challenge of functioning without him.

Many religious movements collapse under such circumstances.

The remarkable fact is not that the Restoration divided.

The remarkable fact is that multiple branches survived.

Sidney Rigdon's Claim

One of the earliest claimants was Sidney Rigdon.

Rigdon had served as a counselor to Joseph Smith and occupied a prominent position within church leadership.

Following the Prophet's death, he argued that the church needed a guardian rather than a successor.

According to Rigdon, he was uniquely qualified to fulfill that role.

His claim possessed certain strengths.

He held a recognized leadership office.

He had been associated with Joseph Smith for years.

He possessed considerable preaching ability.

Yet significant opposition emerged.

Many Saints doubted his authority.

Others questioned his judgment.

Still others preferred alternative leadership arrangements.

Ultimately, Rigdon failed to secure broad support.

His movement survived only in limited form.

Nevertheless, his claim demonstrates how uncertain the situation initially appeared.

The Claim of the Twelve

The most successful challenge to Rigdon came from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles led by Brigham Young.

The Twelve argued that priesthood authority had been entrusted to them.

Although Joseph Smith was gone, the quorum remained.

Leadership therefore should continue through established priesthood structures.

This position appealed to many members.

The Twelve were experienced leaders.

They had directed missionary efforts.

They possessed organizational ability.

Most importantly, they offered continuity.

The famous meeting of August 1844 became a turning point.

Numerous participants later recalled feeling that Brigham Young spoke with unusual spiritual power.

Some even claimed that his appearance or voice resembled Joseph Smith.

These accounts became important elements of Utah succession narratives.

The Reorganization later questioned portions of these recollections, noting that many were recorded long afterward.

Nevertheless, the meeting clearly strengthened Brigham Young's position.

James Strang and Alternative Claims

Another major claimant was James Strang.

Unlike Rigdon and Young, Strang claimed direct appointment through a letter allegedly written by Joseph Smith.

He also reported angelic visitations and new revelations.

For a time, Strang attracted substantial support.

Several important leaders joined his movement.

Even some members of the Smith family initially viewed his claims sympathetically.

The rise of Strang illustrates an often-overlooked reality:

The succession crisis remained genuinely open for several years.

Brigham Young's eventual success should not obscure the uncertainty of the immediate post-Carthage period.

Numerous possibilities existed.

History could have developed very differently.

The Position of the Smith Family

The reaction of Joseph Smith's family proved especially significant.

Emma Smith did not support Brigham Young.

Neither did several other family members.

This fact later became central to RLDS arguments.

If Brigham Young truly represented Joseph Smith's intended successor, why did the Prophet's own family refuse to follow him?

Supporters of Young offered various explanations.

They pointed to personal disagreements.

They emphasized theological disputes.

They noted tensions that developed after Joseph Smith's death.

The Reorganization interpreted the situation differently.

For many RLDS believers, the family's refusal to support Brigham Young suggested that his leadership represented a departure from Joseph Smith's intentions.

Did Joseph Smith Designate a Successor?

One of the most important historical questions concerns Joseph Smith's own intentions.

Did he clearly designate a successor before his death?

The evidence remains disputed.

Various individuals later claimed that Joseph Smith had appointed them or their organizations.

Supporters of Brigham Young pointed to statements concerning the Twelve.

Supporters of Joseph Smith III pointed to other evidence emphasizing lineal succession.

Different sources supported different conclusions.

The absence of a universally accepted designation lies at the heart of the succession crisis.

Had Joseph Smith left an unambiguous written declaration accepted by all parties, much later conflict might have been avoided.

History, however, rarely provides such clarity.

The Doctrine of Lineal Succession

One of the defining features of the Reorganized tradition became the doctrine of lineal succession.

According to this view, leadership properly remained within Joseph Smith's family line.

Supporters pointed to biblical precedents.

They emphasized statements allegedly made by Joseph Smith regarding his sons.

They argued that hereditary succession provided continuity and legitimacy.

This idea appealed strongly to many believers.

It offered a clear connection to the founding prophet.

It preserved family leadership.

It distinguished the Reorganization from competing movements.

Critics argued that lineal succession lacked sufficient doctrinal foundation.

The debate became a central feature of Restoration history.

Joseph Smith III's Reluctance

An important aspect of the story often overlooked is Joseph Smith III's initial reluctance.

He did not immediately seek leadership.

Years passed before he formally accepted the role.

This hesitation strengthened his credibility in the eyes of many supporters.

Ambitious leaders often pursue authority aggressively.

Joseph Smith III appeared cautious.

He sought conviction before accepting responsibility.

When he finally assumed leadership in 1860, many believers interpreted the decision as fulfillment rather than ambition.

The contrast with other succession claimants became part of RLDS historical memory.

The Reorganization of 1860

The formal organization of the Reorganized Church marked a major turning point.

Under Joseph Smith III's leadership, the movement sought to preserve what it regarded as the original principles of the Restoration while rejecting later innovations.

Plural marriage was rejected.

Brigham Young's leadership claims were denied.

Joseph Smith's reputation was vigorously defended.

The Reorganization presented itself not as a new church but as the continuation of the original church organized in 1830.

This distinction was crucial.

RLDS members did not view themselves as creating something new.

They believed they were preserving something old.

The RLDS Critique of Brigham Young

From the Reorganized perspective, Brigham Young's claim suffered from several weaknesses.

First, his leadership emerged through practical necessity rather than explicit appointment.

Second, significant doctrinal changes appeared under his administration.

Third, the Smith family rejected his authority.

Fourth, public polygamy developed during his leadership.

Taken together, these factors convinced many RLDS believers that Young represented divergence rather than continuity.

Whether one agrees with this assessment is another matter.

The important point is that the critique rested upon a coherent historical framework rather than mere personal dislike.

Why Brigham Young Succeeded

A fair historical analysis must acknowledge Brigham Young's achievements.

Whatever one thinks of his theology, he was an extraordinary organizer.

He provided stability during crisis.

He led a successful migration.

He preserved institutional continuity.

He built communities under difficult conditions.

These accomplishments explain why his movement became the largest branch of the Restoration.

Numerical success alone does not prove theological correctness.

Yet it does demonstrate effective leadership.

The Reorganization generally recognized this reality even while disputing Young's legitimacy.

Competing Visions of the Restoration

By the late nineteenth century, two major visions of the Restoration had emerged.

The Utah tradition emphasized priesthood authority through the Twelve, gathering in the West, temple ordinances, and acceptance of Joseph Smith's later teachings.

The Reorganized tradition emphasized lineal succession, monogamy, continuing revelation, and a return to what it regarded as the Prophet's original teachings.

Both claimed Joseph Smith.

Both appealed to Restoration scripture.

Both viewed themselves as legitimate heirs.

The succession crisis therefore became more than a historical event.

It became an ongoing debate concerning identity.

What History Can and Cannot Prove

Historical investigation can illuminate the succession crisis.

It can examine documents.

It can evaluate testimonies.

It can compare competing claims.

Yet some questions remain difficult to resolve with certainty.

Intentions are not always clear.

Memories conflict.

Sources disagree.

Reasonable historians continue to reach different conclusions.

Recognizing these limitations is important.

Historical humility often serves truth better than excessive certainty.

The Restoration Beyond the Crisis

Despite division, the Restoration survived.

Multiple branches continued.

Different communities preserved different aspects of Joseph Smith's legacy.

This survival itself is remarkable.

Many religious movements collapse after the death of a founder.

The Restoration adapted.

It diversified.

It endured.

The succession crisis therefore represents both a tragedy and a testimony to resilience.

The movement fragmented, yet it did not disappear.

Conclusion

The succession crisis of 1844 remains one of the defining moments in Restoration history.

Different leaders offered different visions.

Different communities followed different paths.

Among the resulting movements, the Reorganization emerged as the principal alternative to the Utah church.

Under Joseph Smith III, it developed a distinctive interpretation of Joseph Smith's life, teachings, and intentions.

Understanding that interpretation requires examining the man who would become its central leader.

The next chapter therefore turns to the life and mission of Joseph Smith III and the formation of the Reorganized Church—a movement that sought to preserve the Restoration while rejecting what it viewed as later innovations.

Chapter 16

Joseph Smith III and the Reorganization

The Restoration Reborn

Among the many figures who shaped the history of the Restoration after Joseph Smith's death, none was more important to the Reorganized tradition than his eldest surviving son, Joseph Smith III.

For members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Joseph Smith III represented continuity with the founding prophet.

He was not merely a successor.

He was a symbol.

A link between the original Restoration and its future.

A living reminder that the work begun in 1830 had not ended at Carthage.

A witness that the movement could continue without embracing doctrines the Reorganization believed had emerged after Joseph Smith's death.

Under his leadership, the Reorganized Church would become the largest non-Utah branch of the Restoration.

It would develop its own missionary efforts.

Its own institutions.

Its own theological identity.

Most importantly, it would become the principal defender of a particular understanding of Joseph Smith—a Joseph Smith who rejected polygamy, upheld monogamous family life, and sought the restoration of Christianity rather than the creation of a radically new religion.

To understand the Reorganization, one must understand Joseph Smith III.

Growing Up in the Shadow of a Prophet

Joseph Smith III was born on November 6, 1832.

He spent his childhood during some of the most turbulent years of early Restoration history.

He witnessed persecution.

He experienced migration.

He observed both the triumphs and difficulties of his father's ministry.

Most importantly, he knew Joseph Smith not merely as a prophet but as a father.

This distinction would profoundly shape his later views.

For many people, Joseph Smith existed primarily as a religious leader.

For Joseph Smith III, he was also a family member.

His memories differed from those of apostles, missionaries, or distant converts.

This personal connection became an important source of authority within the Reorganized tradition.

The Trauma of Carthage

The murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1844 profoundly affected the Smith family.

Joseph Smith III was only eleven years old.

The loss was devastating.

Beyond personal grief, the family suddenly found itself at the center of a growing struggle over succession.

Different factions claimed legitimacy.

Different leaders advanced competing visions.

Emma Smith and her children largely remained outside the westward migration.

This decision would shape the future course of Restoration history.

Had the Smith family followed Brigham Young to Utah, the Reorganization might never have emerged in its later form.

History often turns upon such moments.

Emma Smith's Influence

No figure influenced Joseph Smith III more than his mother, Emma Hale Smith.

Emma possessed strong convictions regarding Joseph Smith's legacy.

She rejected Brigham Young's leadership.

She denied that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

She remained committed to the Restoration while refusing to follow the Utah church.

These views profoundly shaped Joseph Smith III's understanding of history.

Critics sometimes suggest that Emma's influence predetermined his conclusions.

Certainly it influenced him.

How could it not?

Parents shape children.

Yet influence is not the same as control.

As an adult, Joseph Smith III conducted his own investigations and reached his own conclusions.

Nevertheless, Emma's testimony remained foundational.

Years of Waiting

One of the most striking features of Joseph Smith III's story is his reluctance to assume leadership.

Unlike many religious claimants throughout history, he did not aggressively seek power.

Years passed.

Opportunities arose.

Supporters encouraged him.

Yet he hesitated.

This caution impressed many observers.

It suggested sincerity rather than ambition.

Joseph Smith III repeatedly stated that he desired divine confirmation before accepting such responsibility.

Whether one accepts his claims of spiritual guidance is a matter of faith.

Historically, however, his reluctance contributed significantly to his credibility.

Acceptance of Leadership

In 1860, Joseph Smith III formally accepted leadership of the Reorganized Church.

The event represented more than a personal decision.

It symbolized the consolidation of an alternative Restoration movement.

The Reorganization now possessed a leader connected directly to the founding prophet.

For supporters, this development seemed providential.

The Restoration had survived fragmentation.

The prophetic line had continued.

A new chapter was beginning.

Joseph Smith III approached leadership differently than many contemporaries.

He emphasized moderation.

He valued organization.

He sought stability.

These qualities would characterize much of his presidency.

Defining the Reorganized Church

One of Joseph Smith III's most important tasks involved defining what the Reorganized Church stood for.

The movement could not simply oppose Utah Mormonism.

It needed a positive identity of its own.

Several themes emerged.

The Reorganization affirmed:

- The Book of Mormon.
- The inspired mission of Joseph Smith.
- Continuing revelation.
- The Doctrine and Covenants.
- The restoration of the gospel.

At the same time, it rejected:

- Plural marriage.
- The Adam-God doctrine.
- Blood atonement teachings.
- Certain speculative theological developments associated with Utah Mormonism.

This combination created a distinctive Restoration identity.

The Reorganization viewed itself as preserving the original church while correcting later deviations.

Defender of Joseph Smith

Perhaps no task occupied Joseph Smith III more consistently than defending his father's reputation.

Throughout his life, critics attacked Joseph Smith from multiple directions.

Some accused him of fraud.

Others condemned alleged involvement in plural marriage.

Still others questioned his prophetic claims.

Joseph Smith III responded through sermons, publications, interviews, and historical research.

His defense rested upon several principles.

First, Joseph Smith should be judged according to contemporary evidence rather than hostile rumors.

Second, public statements deserved serious consideration.

Third, later developments should not automatically be projected backward onto the founding prophet.

Fourth, historical inquiry should remain fair and balanced.

These principles shaped RLDS apologetics for generations.

Missionary Expansion

Under Joseph Smith III, the Reorganized Church expanded significantly.

Missionaries traveled throughout North America and beyond.

Congregations formed in new regions.

Publications increased.

Institutions developed.

Many outsiders today are unaware of the Reorganization's historical influence.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it represented a major force within the broader Restoration movement.

Its growth demonstrated that an alternative to Utah Mormonism could survive and prosper.

This fact remains historically important.

The Restoration was never monolithic.

Multiple visions competed.

The Reorganization became the strongest alternative.

A Different Vision of Zion

Joseph Smith III also helped reshape the Restoration understanding of Zion.

Early Saints often associated Zion with specific geographic gathering places.

The Reorganization gradually developed a broader perspective.

Community remained important.

Justice remained important.

Peace remained important.

Yet Zion increasingly became understood as a way of life rather than merely a destination.

This development reflected both practical realities and theological reflection.

The result was a vision of Zion that could exist wherever believers sought to embody the principles of Christ.

This emphasis would continue influencing the movement long after Joseph Smith III's death.

Continuing Revelation

Like his father, Joseph Smith III believed in continuing revelation.

The Reorganized Church therefore continued adding sections to its Doctrine and Covenants.

This commitment distinguished it from many Protestant traditions.

The heavens remained open.

God continued speaking.

New circumstances required new guidance.

Importantly, Joseph Smith III generally approached revelation with caution.

His style differed from the dramatic prophetic image often associated with his father.

Yet the principle remained the same.

The Restoration was not merely a historical event.

It was an ongoing process.

Relations with Utah Mormonism

The relationship between the Reorganization and the Utah church remained complex.

Disagreements were significant.

Public debates occurred.

Historical controversies persisted.

Yet both traditions shared common roots.

Both revered Joseph Smith.

Both accepted the Book of Mormon.

Both claimed continuity with the Restoration.

Joseph Smith III criticized Utah doctrines vigorously.

At the same time, he generally avoided reducing all opponents to caricatures.

This approach helped maintain a degree of seriousness in Restoration dialogue.

The disagreements were real.

Yet they concerned history and theology rather than personal hatred.

The Character of Joseph Smith III

Historical assessments of Joseph Smith III are generally favorable, even among those who disagree with his conclusions.

He was widely regarded as sincere, thoughtful, and principled.

Unlike some religious leaders, he displayed little interest in personal extravagance.

His leadership style emphasized stability rather than spectacle.

These qualities strengthened the Reorganized Church.

They also enhanced the credibility of its historical arguments.

Supporters viewed him as a trustworthy guardian of the Restoration.

Critics often respected him even when disagreeing with his interpretations.

The RLDS Understanding of Prophetic Leadership

Under Joseph Smith III, the Reorganized Church developed a distinctive understanding of prophetic leadership.

Prophets were important.

Revelation was important.

Yet leadership increasingly operated through councils, conferences, and communal discernment.

This emphasis differed from stereotypes sometimes associated with prophetic authority.

The result was a model balancing revelation with institutional accountability.

Whether entirely successful or not, it reflected the Reorganization's desire to preserve spiritual authority without excessive concentration of power.

Legacy and Influence

Joseph Smith III served as president of the Reorganized Church for more than half a century.

His influence upon the movement is difficult to overstate.

He shaped its theology.

Its historical memory.

Its institutional culture.

Its understanding of Joseph Smith.

Most importantly, he ensured that an alternative Restoration narrative survived.

Without Joseph Smith III, the Utah interpretation of Mormon history might have become overwhelmingly dominant.

Instead, another voice remained.

A voice insisting that Joseph Smith should be distinguished from later developments.

A voice defending the Prophet against accusations of polygamy.

A voice proclaiming continuity with the original Restoration.

Strengths and Limitations

Historical fairness requires acknowledging both strengths and limitations.

Joseph Smith III was deeply committed to defending his father.

This commitment inspired valuable research.

It also created potential biases.

No historian is entirely neutral.

Family loyalty inevitably influenced perspective.

Yet loyalty alone does not invalidate conclusions.

The challenge is weighing evidence carefully.

Modern readers should appreciate both the insights and limitations of Joseph Smith III's position.

Such balance strengthens historical understanding.

Conclusion

Under Joseph Smith III, the Reorganized Church emerged as the principal alternative heir to the Restoration.

It preserved belief in Joseph Smith's prophetic mission while rejecting doctrines it regarded as later innovations.

It defended the Book of Mormon, continuing revelation, and the restoration of Christianity.

At the same time, it opposed plural marriage and challenged the legitimacy of Brigham Young's succession.

Through decades of leadership, Joseph Smith III helped define what Restorationism would mean outside of Utah.

His work laid the foundation for generations of RLDS thought and continues to influence Restoration traditions today.

The next chapter examines the man whose leadership the Reorganization most strongly challenged:

Brigham Young.

Was he the faithful successor of Joseph Smith?

Or did he fundamentally transform the Restoration after the Prophet's death?

The answer depends largely upon how one interprets the relationship between continuity and change in religious history.

Chapter 17

Brigham Young and the Transformation of Mormonism

Continuity or Departure?

Few figures in Restoration history inspire stronger reactions than Brigham Young.

To supporters, he was a prophet, pioneer, colonizer, administrator, and successor to Joseph Smith. Without his leadership, the church might not have survived the chaos that followed Carthage. He led thousands across the American frontier, established settlements throughout the West, and transformed a persecuted religious movement into a lasting civilization.

To critics, particularly within the historic RLDS tradition, Brigham Young represented something very different.

He was viewed not as the faithful preserver of Joseph Smith's vision but as its chief transformer.

According to this perspective, Brigham Young inherited the Restoration and then altered it.

The issue was not whether he was capable.

The issue was whether he remained faithful to the original foundations laid by Joseph Smith.

This question lies at the heart of Restoration history.

The debate is not simply about Brigham Young.

It is about the nature of continuity itself.

How much change can occur before a movement becomes something different from what it originally was?

The Reorganization answered that question one way.

The Utah church answered it another.

Brigham Young's Undeniable Achievements

Any fair assessment must begin by acknowledging Brigham Young's accomplishments.

Whatever one's theological conclusions, his organizational abilities were extraordinary.

He successfully led a mass migration.

He established settlements across vast territories.

He maintained institutional stability under difficult conditions.

He inspired remarkable loyalty.

These achievements deserve recognition.

Historical honesty requires more than defending one's preferred tradition.

It requires acknowledging strengths even in those with whom one disagrees.

The Reorganized tradition sometimes emphasized Brigham Young's errors so heavily that his accomplishments received insufficient attention.

Yet understanding the full picture requires balance.

Brigham Young was one of the most capable religious organizers in American history.

That fact should not be denied.

The RLDS Critique Begins

The Reorganized critique did not focus primarily upon Brigham Young's character.

Instead, it focused upon doctrine.

RLDS writers repeatedly asked a simple question:

Did Brigham Young teach what Joseph Smith taught?

If the answer was yes, then his leadership gained credibility.

If the answer was no, then serious questions arose.

Several issues became especially important.

Plural marriage.

The Adam-God doctrine.

Blood atonement.

Racial priesthood restrictions.

The nature of prophetic authority.

Temple theology.

Each represented an area where RLDS writers believed Utah Mormonism had departed from the original Restoration.

The cumulative effect of these differences formed the basis of the Reorganized case against Brigham Young's succession.

The Problem of Polygamy

As discussed in previous chapters, plural marriage became the central point of disagreement.

From the RLDS perspective, Brigham Young transformed a church committed to monogamy into one publicly identified with polygamy.

The significance of this change cannot be overstated.

Marriage affects family life.

Family life affects society.

Consequently, plural marriage altered not merely theology but the daily experience of believers.

Utah defenders argued that the practice originated with Joseph Smith.

The Reorganization denied this.

Thus the question of polygamy became inseparable from the question of succession.

If Brigham Young introduced the practice, then he had changed the Restoration.

If he inherited it, then he had preserved it.

The debate remains unresolved between traditions.

Adam-God Theology

Among the most controversial teachings associated with Brigham Young was the Adam-God doctrine.

Various interpretations exist, and scholars continue debating exactly what Brigham Young intended.

At minimum, he taught ideas concerning Adam that many later Latter-day Saints found difficult to reconcile with traditional doctrine.

The Reorganized Church strongly rejected these teachings.

RLDS writers argued that such concepts lacked support in Joseph Smith's public teachings and represented speculative innovation.

This issue became particularly important because it suggested a broader pattern.

The concern was not one isolated doctrine.

The concern was a willingness to introduce ideas absent from earlier Restoration teaching.

Blood Atonement

Another subject generating controversy involved blood atonement.

Certain statements by Brigham Young and other Utah leaders suggested that some sins were so serious that the sinner's own blood would be required.

Modern interpretations vary widely.

Some scholars emphasize rhetoric and context.

Others argue that the doctrine was never systematically implemented.

Regardless of interpretation, RLDS writers regarded such teachings as deeply troubling.

They contrasted them with Joseph Smith's emphasis upon Christ's atonement.

For the Reorganization, blood atonement symbolized theological excess.

It represented the dangers of speculative doctrine untethered from the original gospel.

Race and Priesthood

Perhaps no issue more clearly illustrates the difference between Joseph Smith and Brigham Young from a traditional RLDS perspective than race.

Historical evidence demonstrates that Black men held priesthood office during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

Figures such as Elijah Abel received ordination.

The Utah church later adopted racial restrictions under Brigham Young's leadership.

Those restrictions remained in place for generations.

The Reorganization consistently pointed to this contrast.

If Black men could hold priesthood office under Joseph Smith, why were they excluded later?

The RLDS answer was straightforward:

The restriction originated with Brigham Young rather than Joseph Smith.

This issue will receive more detailed treatment in later chapters, but it remains important here because it demonstrates another area where the Reorganization perceived discontinuity.

The Concentration of Authority

The Reorganized tradition also expressed concern regarding the concentration of authority in Utah leadership structures.

Brigham Young exercised immense influence.

He governed not only a church but also a society.

The unique circumstances of frontier Utah contributed to this reality.

Isolation encouraged centralized leadership.

Survival often required coordination.

Yet RLDS writers worried that prophetic authority had expanded beyond appropriate limits.

The issue was not merely administrative.

It involved theology.

How should revelation function?

What role should councils play?

How much authority should rest in a single leader?

Different answers emerged within different branches of the Restoration.

Temple Theology and Expansion

Temple worship developed significantly in Utah.

Additional ceremonies and theological frameworks emerged.

The Reorganized Church generally maintained a more restrained approach.

RLDS thinkers often argued that temple developments reflected expansion beyond Joseph Smith's original intentions.

Utah defenders disagreed, pointing to teachings and practices from the Nauvoo period.

This disagreement illustrates a recurring pattern.

Both traditions appealed to Joseph Smith.

Both claimed continuity.

Yet they interpreted the same historical evidence differently.

The resulting divergence shaped their identities.

Was Brigham Young a False Prophet?

Some early RLDS writers used extremely harsh language when discussing Brigham Young.

They occasionally portrayed him as a usurper or false prophet.

Such rhetoric reflected nineteenth-century denominational conflict.

Modern readers should approach it cautiously.

Historical figures are rarely well understood through polemics.

Brigham Young's contributions and failures both deserve recognition.

The more important question is not whether he was entirely good or entirely bad.

The more important question is whether his leadership preserved or transformed the Restoration.

That question allows for nuance.

One may acknowledge achievements while still identifying significant departures.

Continuity Through Development?

Supporters of Brigham Young often respond that religious movements naturally develop.

Doctrines expand.

Practices evolve.

Institutions change.

From this perspective, differences between Nauvoo and Utah do not necessarily indicate apostasy or innovation.

They may represent maturation.

This argument possesses genuine strength.

Every major religious tradition develops over time.

The challenge lies in determining when development remains faithful to original principles and when it becomes transformation.

The answer is often subjective.

Reasonable people disagree.

The Restoration debate reflects this broader historical problem.

The RLDS Standard of Measurement

The Reorganization approached these questions through a particular lens.

Its standard of measurement was the public ministry of Joseph Smith.

Teachings clearly present during his lifetime received priority.

Later innovations were viewed with suspicion.

This method naturally produced different conclusions than those reached in Utah.

If Joseph Smith's public teachings constitute the primary standard, then many later developments appear problematic.

If private teachings and continuing revelation receive equal weight, then those developments appear more defensible.

The disagreement therefore concerns methodology as much as doctrine.

The Human Side of Brigham Young

It is easy for denominational debates to reduce historical figures to symbols.

Brigham Young deserves better than that.

He was a human being.

He possessed strengths and weaknesses.

He operated under immense pressure.

He faced challenges unlike those confronting most religious leaders.

His decisions affected thousands of lives.

Understanding this complexity does not require agreement.

It requires empathy.

Historical fairness means recognizing that even those with whom we disagree often act from sincere conviction.

The Reorganized critique is strongest when it addresses ideas and actions rather than caricatures.

What the Reorganization Preserved

One reason RLDS criticism of Brigham Young remained so persistent is that the Reorganization believed it was preserving something precious.

Monogamy.

Lineal succession.

The original teachings of Joseph Smith.

A more traditional Christian framework.

The movement did not view itself merely as opposing Utah.

It viewed itself as safeguarding the Restoration.

Whether one accepts that claim is another matter.

Yet understanding the motivation behind the critique is essential.

The debate was not fundamentally about hostility.

It was about fidelity.

Modern Perspectives

Contemporary scholarship often approaches Brigham Young more cautiously than earlier polemics.

Many historians recognize both continuity and change.

Some developments clearly trace back to Joseph Smith.

Others appear more strongly associated with Brigham Young.

The historical picture is complex.

Absolute narratives rarely capture reality.

This complexity should not discourage inquiry.

Rather, it should encourage humility.

The past is often richer and more complicated than partisans on either side imagine.

Conclusion

Brigham Young remains one of the most consequential figures in Restoration history.

Without him, the Utah church likely would not exist in its present form.

Without him, the westward migration might never have occurred.

Without him, Mormonism would have developed very differently.

The historic RLDS tradition respected his abilities while questioning his theology.

It admired his achievements while disputing his claim to continuity with Joseph Smith.

At the heart of the disagreement lay a simple question:

Did Brigham Young preserve the Restoration, or did he transform it?

The answer depends largely upon how one interprets the relationship between Joseph Smith's original teachings and the developments that followed.

The next chapter brings these issues together by comparing the theological and historical differences between RLDS Restorationism and Brighamite Mormonism directly.

Only by placing the two side by side can we fully understand the depth of the divide that emerged after 1844.

Chapter 18

Restorationism Versus Brighamism

Two Competing Visions of the Restoration

By the late nineteenth century, the great succession struggle that followed Joseph Smith's death had evolved into something larger than a debate about leadership.

It had become a debate about the very meaning of the Restoration.

Both the Reorganized Church and the Utah church claimed Joseph Smith.

Both accepted the Book of Mormon.

Both revered the First Vision.

Both believed in continuing revelation.

Both traced their origins to the church organized in 1830.

Yet despite these shared foundations, they increasingly developed into distinct religious traditions.

The disagreement was no longer merely historical.

It was theological.

Ecclesiastical.

Practical.

Even cultural.

The question facing believers became increasingly clear:

Which movement more faithfully preserved the Restoration established by Joseph Smith?

The Utah church answered one way.

The Reorganization answered another.

This chapter examines the major differences between these competing visions.

The Fundamental Question

At the heart of the debate lies a simple issue.

Was the Restoration complete at Joseph Smith's death?

Or was it still unfolding?

The answer shapes everything else.

The Reorganized tradition generally viewed Joseph Smith's public teachings as the primary standard.

Later developments were measured against that standard.

If a doctrine appeared absent from Joseph Smith's ministry, suspicion naturally followed.

The Utah tradition approached matters differently.

It emphasized continuing revelation and ongoing doctrinal development.

Teachings introduced after Joseph Smith could still be authentic if they emerged through legitimate prophetic authority.

Thus the disagreement concerned not only specific doctrines but the nature of revelation itself.

Different Views of Joseph Smith

Ironically, both traditions honored Joseph Smith while understanding him differently.

The historic RLDS tradition emphasized:

- Joseph Smith as a Christian prophet.
- Joseph Smith as a restorer.
- Joseph Smith as a defender of monogamous family life.
- Joseph Smith as a religious reformer.

- Joseph Smith as a martyr.

The Utah tradition emphasized:

- Joseph Smith as a prophet of expansive revelation.
- Joseph Smith as a temple theologian.
- Joseph Smith as the initiator of doctrines later developed in Utah.
- Joseph Smith as the founder of a distinct covenant people.
- Joseph Smith as the source of advanced theological teachings.

These portraits overlap considerably.

Yet important differences remain.

The result is that the same historical figure often appears quite different depending upon the tradition describing him.

Scripture and Canon

Both traditions accepted the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants.

Yet differences emerged regarding later revelations.

The Reorganized Church continued adding revelations through successive presidents, eventually extending its canon through Section 144 and beyond.

The Utah church also continued receiving revelations, though fewer sections were added to its Doctrine and Covenants.

This similarity is often overlooked.

Both traditions believed revelation continued.

The disagreement concerned content rather than principle.

The question was not whether God still spoke.

The question was what God was saying.

The Nature of Zion

Early Restoration believers frequently spoke of Zion.

Yet interpretations evolved.

The Utah tradition often emphasized gathering and covenant community in the West.

Physical gathering became central.

The Reorganization increasingly developed a broader understanding.

Zion remained a community of covenant.

Yet it also became a spiritual and ethical ideal.

Justice.

Peace.

Reconciliation.

Christlike living.

These themes grew increasingly prominent.

Both traditions retained the language of Zion.

They simply emphasized different aspects of it.

Priesthood and Leadership

Leadership structures also developed differently.

The Utah church maintained a strong emphasis upon hierarchical authority.

Prophetic leadership occupied a central role.

The Reorganization retained prophetic leadership but increasingly emphasized conference governance, councils, and communal discernment.

These differences reflected broader theological assumptions.

The Utah model stressed continuity through priesthood authority.

The RLDS model stressed continuity through both authority and collective accountability.

Neither side denied the importance of leadership.

They differed regarding how leadership should function.

The Question of Polygamy

No issue better symbolizes the divide than plural marriage.

For the historic RLDS tradition, polygamy represented perhaps the clearest evidence of departure from Joseph Smith's original teachings.

For the Utah tradition, plural marriage represented obedience to revelation received through Joseph Smith and preserved by Brigham Young.

The disagreement was profound.

It affected historical interpretation.

It affected family life.

It affected public reputation.

Most importantly, it affected how each tradition understood the Prophet himself.

The debate remains central because it touches the very heart of Restoration identity.

Race and Equality

Another major difference involved race.

Historical evidence indicates that Black men such as Elijah Abel held priesthood office during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

The Utah church later restricted priesthood access based on race.

The Reorganized Church did not adopt equivalent restrictions.

Consequently, RLDS writers frequently pointed to race as evidence that Brigham Young introduced innovations absent from Joseph Smith's ministry.

This argument carried significant weight within Reorganized apologetics.

It remains one of the strongest historical contrasts between the two traditions.

Theological Speculation

The Reorganized Church generally approached speculative theology cautiously.

While accepting continuing revelation, it tended to remain closer to broader Christian language and concepts.

The Utah tradition developed more expansive theological systems.

Ideas concerning eternal progression, exaltation, premortal existence, temple cosmology, and related subjects became increasingly prominent.

The Reorganization did not necessarily reject every such idea.

Yet it often viewed later elaborations with skepticism.

The issue was not merely doctrine.

It was method.

How far should theological development proceed?

Different answers produced different traditions.

Christianity and the Restoration

Perhaps the deepest difference concerns self-understanding.

The Reorganization increasingly emphasized its identity as a Christian church participating in the broader Christian tradition.

The Restoration was viewed as a renewal of Christianity.

Not a replacement for it.

The Utah tradition often emphasized the unique identity of the restored church as the divinely authorized continuation of Christ's church.

Again, overlap exists.

Both traditions considered themselves Christian.

Both believed in restoration.

The distinction concerns emphasis.

The RLDS vision often stressed continuity with historic Christianity.

The Utah vision often stressed the uniqueness of the Restoration.

The Legacy of Joseph Smith III

The influence of Joseph Smith III upon this divergence cannot be overstated.

His leadership helped define what Restorationism outside Utah would become.

He defended his father.

He rejected plural marriage.

He promoted continuing revelation.

He emphasized moderation and stability.

Most importantly, he preserved an alternative interpretation of Restoration history.

Without Joseph Smith III, the Utah narrative might have dominated almost completely.

His work ensured that another perspective survived.

What the Reorganization Claimed to Preserve

The Reorganization consistently claimed to preserve:

- The original teachings of Joseph Smith.
- Monogamous marriage.
- The prophetic mission of Joseph Smith.
- Continuing revelation.
- The Book of Mormon.
- The original church organized in 1830.
- A more traditional Christian framework.

Whether these claims are accepted is another matter.

The important point is that they formed the core of RLDS identity.

The movement did not view itself as creating something new.

It viewed itself as preserving something old.

What the Utah Church Claimed to Preserve

Likewise, the Utah church claimed preservation rather than innovation.

Its leaders argued that:

- The Twelve received legitimate authority.
- Joseph Smith introduced later doctrines before his death.
- Temple teachings originated with Joseph Smith.

- Plural marriage came from Joseph Smith.
- Continuing revelation justified subsequent developments.

Thus both traditions claimed continuity.

Both claimed fidelity.

Both claimed Joseph Smith.

The disagreement therefore concerns interpretation rather than mere historical memory.

The Problem of Historical Certainty

One lesson emerges repeatedly from Restoration history.

Certainty is often more difficult than partisans assume.

Evidence exists on multiple sides.

Sources conflict.

Memories differ.

Documents require interpretation.

This reality should encourage humility.

Historical inquiry is strongest when it remains open to complexity.

The goal is not merely defending a tradition.

The goal is understanding what actually happened.

A Restorationist Defense

From a Restorationist perspective rooted in the historic RLDS tradition, several conclusions emerge.

Joseph Smith should not automatically be judged by doctrines that became prominent only after his death.

Public teachings deserve priority over retrospective claims.

Emma Smith's testimony deserves serious consideration.

Joseph Smith III's investigations deserve respect.

Brigham Young's achievements should be acknowledged while remaining open to the possibility that he altered significant aspects of the Restoration.

These conclusions do not require hostility toward Utah Mormonism.

They simply reflect a particular reading of the evidence.

The Continuing Relevance of the Debate

Some may wonder why these questions still matter.

The answer lies in identity.

How one understands Joseph Smith shapes how one understands the Restoration.

How one understands the Restoration shapes theology, scripture, worship, and community.

The debate therefore remains more than historical.

It continues influencing living traditions.

The past is never entirely past.

It remains active in the present.

Toward the Later Teachings of Joseph Smith

Having examined the major differences between Restorationism and Brighamism, we must now turn to another important issue.

Critics often claim that teachings such as the **Book of Abraham**, the **King Follett Discourse**, and related theological developments prove that Joseph Smith abandoned Christianity.

The historic RLDS tradition often approached these matters cautiously, yet many Restorationists have argued that such teachings can be understood in harmony with Christian faith when interpreted properly.

The next section therefore examines these controversial teachings directly.

Were they radical departures?

Were they misunderstood?

Or can they be reconciled with a Restoration theology centered upon Christ, revelation, and the eventual redemption of creation?

Part V

The Book of Abraham, the King Follett Discourse, and Restoration Theology

Chapter 19

The Book of Abraham

Scripture, Controversy, and Possible Interpretations

Few subjects in Restoration history generate more controversy than the Book of Abraham.

For critics, it is often regarded as one of the strongest arguments against Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

For believers, it remains a profound and inspiring text containing unique insights into creation, humanity, pre-mortal existence, covenant, and the relationship between God and the cosmos.

For the historic RLDS tradition, the situation has often been more complicated.

Unlike the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham was never universally embraced within the Reorganized tradition. Many RLDS leaders treated it cautiously. Some regarded it as interesting but non-canonical. Others questioned aspects of its origin while still appreciating its theological value.

Yet caution is not rejection.

The question before us is not whether every traditional claim concerning the Book of Abraham can be defended exactly as originally understood.

The question is whether the existence of controversies surrounding the book necessarily disproves Joseph Smith's prophetic mission.

Many critics assume the answer is yes.

A closer examination suggests otherwise.

The Discovery of the Papyri

The story begins in 1835.

A traveling exhibitor arrived in Kirtland with Egyptian antiquities, including mummies and papyrus fragments.

Joseph Smith and other church members acquired some of these materials.

Soon afterward, Joseph announced that the papyri contained writings associated with Abraham and Joseph of Egypt.

Work began on what eventually became known as the Book of Abraham.

For believers, this represented another example of revealed scripture.

For critics, it created a future problem.

If the papyri survived and could eventually be translated by modern Egyptologists, Joseph Smith's claims would become subject to direct comparison.

At the time, however, no such comparison was possible.

Egyptian hieroglyphics had only recently begun to be understood in the wider scholarly world.

The Traditional Understanding

For many years, believers generally assumed a straightforward explanation.

Joseph Smith possessed papyri written by Abraham.

He translated them.

The result became the Book of Abraham.

The process appeared relatively simple.

This understanding dominated much of nineteenth-century Mormon thought.

The difficulty emerged later when portions of the papyri were rediscovered in the twentieth century.

Modern Egyptologists translated surviving fragments and concluded that they were ordinary Egyptian funerary texts rather than writings composed by Abraham.

Critics immediately viewed this as devastating evidence against Joseph Smith.

The situation, however, proved more complicated than it initially appeared.

The Missing Papyri Theory

One possible explanation involves the simple fact that only a portion of the original collection survives.

Historical records suggest that Joseph Smith possessed considerably more material than exists today.

Most of the collection appears to have been lost.

Consequently, some defenders argue that the actual source used for the Book of Abraham may no longer exist.

Under this theory, surviving fragments are not the relevant text.

The genuine Abrahamic material was among the missing portions.

Critics respond that available evidence makes this explanation difficult.

Supporters counter that certainty remains impossible because so much material has disappeared.

The important point is that the rediscovered fragments do not necessarily settle every question.

Significant gaps remain.

The Catalyst Theory

Another interpretation has gained increasing attention among modern Restoration scholars.

This approach is often called the catalyst theory.

According to this view, the papyri functioned as a catalyst for revelation rather than as a direct textual source.

In other words, Joseph Smith may have received inspired knowledge concerning Abraham while examining the papyri,

even if the surviving fragments themselves do not contain Abraham's writings.

This interpretation shifts the question.

Instead of asking whether Joseph produced a conventional scholarly translation, it asks whether revelation can occur through interaction with physical objects.

Such a concept is not entirely foreign to Restoration theology.

The Book of Mormon itself involved sacred objects.

Biblical prophets often received revelation through symbolic means.

The catalyst theory therefore attempts to reconcile modern Egyptology with Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

Revelation Versus Translation

One reason controversy persists is that modern readers often assume that the word "translation" must mean exactly what it means in contemporary academic settings.

Joseph Smith's use of the term appears broader.

The Book of Mormon provides an example.

Witnesses described a revelatory process rather than conventional linguistic scholarship.

Similarly, portions of Joseph Smith's Bible revision involved inspiration rather than direct translation from ancient manuscripts.

Consequently, some scholars argue that Joseph Smith's understanding of translation differed significantly from modern academic definitions.

If true, this observation changes how the Book of Abraham should be evaluated.

The issue becomes one of revelation rather than philology.

The Theological Value of the Text

Even critics often acknowledge that the Book of Abraham contains striking theological concepts.

Its vision of creation differs from many traditional Christian interpretations.

Its portrayal of pre-mortal existence has influenced generations of Restoration believers.

Its cosmic perspective remains distinctive.

These teachings deserve attention independent of debates concerning translation.

A text can possess theological significance even when questions exist regarding its origin.

Indeed, much of religious history involves texts whose origins remain disputed.

The value of a work is not always reducible to a single historical question.

The Historic RLDS Response

The Reorganized tradition generally approached the Book of Abraham with caution.

Unlike the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants, it never occupied the same central position.

Many RLDS leaders chose not to build doctrine upon it.

This restraint ultimately proved advantageous.

When controversies intensified during the twentieth century, the Reorganization was not forced into rigid positions.

It could evaluate evidence more freely.

At the same time, many Restorationists within the RLDS tradition remained open to the possibility that the Book of Abraham contained genuine inspiration.

The question was not necessarily whether every historical claim surrounding the book could be verified.

The question was whether God could reveal truth through Joseph Smith.

Abraham in Ancient Tradition

Another intriguing aspect of the discussion involves ancient Abrahamic literature.

Over the past century, scholars have discovered numerous Jewish, Christian, and other texts associated with Abraham.

Many contain themes surprisingly similar to ideas found in the Book of Abraham.

This observation does not prove divine inspiration.

Neither does it prove historical authenticity.

Yet it complicates simplistic explanations.

Joseph Smith produced a text containing concepts that later discoveries showed were present in ancient Abrahamic traditions unknown to most Americans of his time.

The significance of this fact remains debated.

Nevertheless, it deserves consideration.

The Facsimiles

Particular controversy surrounds the facsimiles published with the Book of Abraham.

Modern Egyptologists generally interpret these images differently than Joseph Smith did.

Critics regard this as strong evidence against his claims.

Defenders have proposed various responses.

Some suggest symbolic interpretation.

Others emphasize differences between ancient and modern approaches to sacred imagery.

Still others argue that Joseph Smith's explanations reflected revelatory insights rather than conventional Egyptological translation.

The debate remains unresolved.

What can be said with confidence is that the facsimiles represent one of the most difficult aspects of the Book of Abraham controversy.

A balanced defense should acknowledge this reality rather than minimizing it.

Does the Book of Abraham Disprove Joseph Smith?

Critics frequently answer yes.

Yet such certainty may exceed the evidence.

The controversy undoubtedly raises important questions.

It challenges simplistic assumptions.

It forces believers to think carefully about revelation and translation.

However, several possible explanations remain available.

Missing papyri.

Catalyst theories.

Broader understandings of translation.

Symbolic interpretation.

Revelatory expansion.

One need not accept every explanation equally.

The point is simply that the existence of controversy does not automatically produce disproof.

Historical questions often remain more complex than critics or defenders prefer.

The Restorationist Perspective

From a Restorationist perspective influenced by the historic RLDS tradition, a cautious approach appears wise.

The Book of Abraham need not serve as the foundation of faith.

The Restoration stands upon broader pillars.

The First Vision.

The Book of Mormon.

The witness of the Spirit.

The restoration of the church.

Continuing revelation.

At the same time, caution does not require rejection.

The possibility remains that the Book of Abraham contains inspired material mediated through a process not yet fully understood.

Such openness allows faith and scholarship to coexist without forcing premature conclusions.

The Book of Abraham and Cosmic Theology

One reason the text remains important is its contribution to Restoration theology.

It presents a universe filled with purpose, intelligence, order, and progression.

Human beings are portrayed as participants in a larger cosmic drama.

Creation appears dynamic rather than static.

These themes resonate strongly with later Restoration thought.

They also fit comfortably within broader currents of Christian mysticism, Eastern Christianity, and theosis-oriented theology.

For Restorationists seeking a vision of humanity's divine destiny, the Book of Abraham remains a rich resource regardless of debates concerning its precise origin.

What Joseph Smith May Have Been Doing

A helpful way of framing the issue is to ask not merely whether Joseph Smith translated Egyptian correctly, but what he believed he was doing.

The historical evidence strongly suggests sincerity.

Joseph Smith appears genuinely convinced that revelation was occurring.

Even many scholars who reject his prophetic claims acknowledge this.

The accusation of deliberate fraud remains difficult to sustain.

One may conclude he misunderstood the papyri.

One may conclude revelation was involved.

One may adopt some intermediate position.

What seems increasingly unlikely is the image of a conscious deceiver inventing scripture for cynical purposes.

Conclusion

The Book of Abraham remains one of the most fascinating and controversial texts associated with Joseph Smith.

Questions regarding translation, papyri, facsimiles, and revelation continue to generate debate.

The historic RLDS tradition approached these questions cautiously while remaining open to inspiration.

That caution may offer a useful model today.

Rather than demanding absolute certainty, it encourages careful inquiry.

Rather than dismissing the text entirely, it invites thoughtful engagement.

Most importantly, it reminds us that Joseph Smith's prophetic mission cannot be reduced to a single controversy.

The next chapter examines another major source of debate:

the King Follett Discourse.

Critics often portray it as evidence that Joseph Smith abandoned Christianity.

Yet many Restorationists have argued that, properly understood, its teachings fit naturally within a broader vision of divine-human communion, theosis, and cosmic restoration.

Whether that argument succeeds remains to be seen.

Chapter 20

The King Follett Discourse

God, Humanity, and the Destiny of Creation

Among all of Joseph Smith's sermons, none has generated more fascination, controversy, and debate than the King Follett Discourse.

Delivered in April 1844 during the final months of his life, the sermon addressed some of the deepest questions imaginable:

Who is God?

What is humanity?

What is the relationship between God and human beings?

What is the ultimate destiny of creation?

For supporters, the discourse represents one of the greatest theological achievements of the Restoration.

For critics, it represents proof that Joseph Smith abandoned historic Christianity and embraced radical speculation.

For the historic RLDS tradition, the situation has often been more complicated.

Some RLDS writers viewed portions of the discourse with caution.

Others saw profound spiritual insight hidden beneath later misunderstandings.

Still others argued that the sermon had been distorted through imperfect transmission.

Whatever one's conclusion, the King Follett Discourse deserves careful examination.

It was among Joseph Smith's final major theological statements.

As such, it provides a unique window into the mature development of Restoration thought.

The Historical Context

The sermon was delivered at a general conference in Nauvoo following the death of a church member named King Follett.

Joseph Smith intended to address questions concerning death, resurrection, and eternal life.

The setting is important.

This was not an abstract philosophical lecture.

It was a pastoral sermon.

People were grieving.

Questions about mortality were immediate and personal.

Joseph Smith's purpose was not merely intellectual.

He sought to provide hope.

Like many of his teachings, the discourse emerged from practical concerns before expanding into broader theological territory.

Understanding this context helps explain both its power and its complexity.

The Problem of the Text

One of the first challenges confronting historians concerns the text itself.

No official transcript exists.

Instead, the discourse survives through notes taken by several listeners.

Later editors combined these notes into composite versions.

As a result, scholars recognize that the surviving text may not perfectly reflect Joseph Smith's exact words.

This fact is significant.

Critics sometimes treat every sentence as though it came directly from a verbatim transcript.

Supporters occasionally do the same.

Historical caution suggests otherwise.

The sermon we possess is a reconstruction.

It likely preserves Joseph Smith's general ideas.

Precise wording, however, remains uncertain in places.

This reality should encourage humility when interpreting controversial passages.

"God Was Once as We Are"

Perhaps the most famous statement associated with the discourse is the claim that God was once as humanity is now.

For many traditional Christians, this idea appears shocking.

Critics often cite it as evidence that Joseph Smith abandoned biblical monotheism.

Yet before rushing to conclusions, we should examine what Joseph Smith may have intended.

The central theme of the sermon concerns divine-human relationship.

Joseph Smith sought to emphasize continuity rather than absolute separation.

Human beings are not alien to God.

They are related to God.

The destiny of humanity involves participation in divine life.

This basic concept is not unique to Mormonism.

Variations appear throughout Christian history.

The question concerns how literally Joseph Smith intended his language to be understood.

Theosis and Christian Tradition

One reason modern Restorationists have revisited the King Follett Discourse is the growing awareness of the doctrine of theosis within historic Christianity.

Theosis refers to participation in the divine life.

Eastern Christian theologians frequently taught that God became human so that humanity might become divine by grace.

Church Fathers such as Athanasius of Alexandria and Irenaeus expressed ideas that, while not identical to Joseph Smith's teachings, point in a similar direction.

Human destiny involves transformation.

Salvation is more than forgiveness.

It is participation in God's life.

From this perspective, portions of the King Follett Discourse appear less radical than critics often assume.

The underlying theme possesses deep roots within Christian tradition.

Humanity's Divine Potential

Joseph Smith repeatedly emphasized humanity's potential.

He rejected views portraying human beings as permanently separated from God.

Instead, he spoke of growth, progression, and transformation.

This emphasis resonated strongly with later Restoration thought.

Yet it can also be understood within broader Christian frameworks.

The New Testament speaks of becoming "partakers of the divine nature."

It speaks of glorification.

It speaks of union with Christ.

The question is not whether transformation occurs.

The question is how it should be understood.

Joseph Smith's language was bold.

At times it appears startling.

Yet the underlying aspiration—the elevation of humanity through divine grace—is profoundly Christian.

Eternal Progression

The discourse also contributed to ideas later associated with eternal progression.

Human beings are not static.

Creation itself moves toward fulfillment.

The future involves growth rather than mere preservation.

Such themes fit naturally within Restoration theology.

They also resonate with many forms of Christian mysticism.

History becomes a journey toward divine communion.

Salvation becomes participation in an ever-deepening relationship with God.

The precise metaphysical implications remain debated.

Nevertheless, the broader vision is one of hope rather than limitation.

Did Joseph Smith Teach Multiple Gods?

Critics often argue that the King Follett Discourse teaches polytheism.

Certain passages can certainly be read that way.

The issue, however, is more complicated.

Joseph Smith's primary concern appears to have been the reality of divine plurality in scripture and the participation of redeemed humanity in divine life.

He was not constructing a systematic theology in the modern sense.

He was preaching.

His language was expansive.

His ideas were exploratory.

Many Restorationists today interpret these themes symbolically or relationally rather than as straightforward polytheism.

The discourse therefore admits multiple readings.

The most hostile interpretation is not necessarily the most accurate.

The RLDS Response

Historically, the RLDS tradition approached the King Follett Discourse cautiously.

Unlike some Utah theologians, Reorganized writers rarely treated the sermon as the definitive statement of Restoration theology.

Several reasons contributed.

First, the text's transmission was uncertain.

Second, portions appeared difficult to reconcile with traditional Christian language.

Third, RLDS leaders generally preferred doctrines grounded in canonized scripture.

Yet caution did not necessarily imply rejection.

Many RLDS thinkers appreciated the sermon's emphasis upon divine love, human dignity, and spiritual transformation.

They simply resisted building elaborate systems upon uncertain textual foundations.

A Mystical Interpretation

One way of understanding the discourse is through a mystical lens.

Rather than treating every statement as a literal metaphysical proposition, one can view the sermon as expressing profound truths about participation in divine life.

In this reading, Joseph Smith's purpose was not to diminish God.

It was to elevate humanity.

God is not distant.

God is relational.

Human beings are called into communion with divine reality.

The ultimate destiny of creation is union rather than separation.

Such themes align remarkably well with Christian mysticism, Eastern Christianity, and many strands of Restoration spirituality.

The King Follett Discourse and Universal Restoration

For Restorationists who embrace a theology of universal reconciliation, the discourse possesses particular significance.

If humanity is destined for participation in divine life, then salvation cannot be reduced merely to avoiding punishment.

The purpose of God's work becomes transformation.

Creation itself moves toward fulfillment.

Divine judgment serves restoration.

History becomes a process of healing.

These themes fit naturally within broader visions of cosmic redemption.

The King Follett Discourse therefore complements rather than contradicts a theology centered upon the victorious Logos and the eventual restoration of all things.

Does the Sermon Contradict Christianity?

Critics frequently answer yes.

The issue depends largely upon how Christianity is defined.

If Christianity is reduced to certain post-Reformation formulations, conflict may appear obvious.

If Christianity is understood more broadly—including patristic theology, Christian mysticism, and the doctrine of theosis—the situation changes.

Many themes in the discourse find surprising parallels within older Christian traditions.

This does not mean Joseph Smith merely repeated earlier teachings.

He clearly developed ideas in distinctive ways.

Yet uniqueness does not equal heresy.

The relationship between the King Follett Discourse and historic Christianity is far more complex than either critics or defenders sometimes admit.

The Humanity of God and the Divinity of Humanity

Perhaps the deepest theme of the sermon involves relationship.

Joseph Smith sought to bridge the gulf between God and humanity.

God is not utterly alien.

Humanity is not worthless.

The Incarnation reveals a profound kinship.

Divine life becomes accessible.

Human beings are called to become what they were created to be.

This vision possesses enormous spiritual power.

Even readers who question specific formulations often recognize the beauty of the underlying message.

The sermon transforms theology from abstract speculation into a story of communion.

Why Critics Focus on the Sermon

The reason is understandable.

The King Follett Discourse represents one of Joseph Smith's most ambitious theological statements.

If critics can portray it as absurd or heretical, they can dismiss much of his later thought.

Yet ambitious ideas inevitably attract controversy.

Throughout history, many influential theologians have been accused of departing from tradition.

The existence of controversy does not automatically determine correctness.

What matters is careful interpretation.

Unfortunately, discussions of the King Follett Discourse often generate more heat than light.

A Restorationist Reading

From a Restorationist perspective rooted in the historic RLDS tradition, the wisest approach may be neither uncritical acceptance nor outright rejection.

The sermon should be read thoughtfully.

Its textual limitations should be acknowledged.

Its insights should be appreciated.

Its speculative elements should be approached cautiously.

Most importantly, it should be interpreted through the broader framework of scripture, Christ-centered faith, and continuing revelation.

Viewed in this way, the King Follett Discourse becomes not a threat to Christianity but a provocative meditation on humanity's destiny in God.

The Harmony of Abraham and King Follett

One of the striking features of Joseph Smith's later thought is the harmony between the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse.

Both emphasize divine order.

Both emphasize human potential.

Both present a cosmos filled with intelligence, purpose, and progression.

Both reject static conceptions of reality.

When interpreted through a Restorationist and theosis-oriented framework, they complement one another naturally.

The result is a vision of creation moving toward divine fulfillment rather than remaining trapped in separation.

Conclusion

The King Follett Discourse remains one of Joseph Smith's most important and controversial teachings.

Its text is imperfectly preserved.

Its language is bold.

Its ideas challenge conventional assumptions.

Yet beneath the controversy lies a profound vision of divine-human communion.

Far from abandoning Christianity, the sermon may be understood as participating in some of Christianity's oldest themes: theosis, transformation, glorification, and union with God.

For the historic RLDS tradition, caution remained appropriate.

For modern Restorationists, thoughtful engagement remains worthwhile.

The next chapter will bring these themes together by examining how the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse can be integrated into a Restoration theology centered upon Christ, continuing revelation, and the redemption of creation.

Chapter 21

Abraham, King Follett, and RLDS Restoration Theology

Integrating Joseph Smith's Later Teachings with the Reorganized Tradition

One of the most common assumptions made by both critics and believers is that the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse necessarily belong to Utah Mormonism rather than the broader Restoration tradition.

According to this view, Joseph Smith's later teachings represent a sharp break from earlier Restoration theology. The implication is clear: if one accepts the historic RLDS tradition, one must reject the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse. If one accepts the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse, one must embrace later Brighamite theology.

This assumption deserves careful examination.

The issue may not be nearly so simple.

The historic Reorganized Church often approached these teachings cautiously, but caution is not the same thing as rejection.

Indeed, many themes found within Joseph Smith's later teachings can be understood in ways entirely compatible with a Christ-centered Restoration theology.

The challenge is interpretation.

The question is not merely what Joseph Smith said.

The question is how those teachings should be understood.

When interpreted through the lens of Restoration Christianity rather than later theological systems, surprising harmony begins to emerge.

The Difference Between Principle and System

A useful starting point is recognizing the difference between principles and systems.

Joseph Smith frequently taught principles.

Later generations often built systems around them.

These are not necessarily identical.

For example, a prophet may speak about humanity's divine destiny.

Later theologians may construct elaborate metaphysical frameworks from that statement.

The original principle and the later system are related but not identical.

This distinction is crucial.

Many RLDS objections focused not upon Joseph Smith's original insights but upon theological systems developed afterward.

Consequently, it is possible to appreciate Joseph Smith's later teachings without accepting every later interpretation.

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse need not be read exclusively through Utah categories.

They may also be read through broader Restoration and Christian lenses.

A Christ-Centered Reading

The historic strength of the Reorganized tradition has always been its Christ-centered emphasis.

Everything ultimately returns to Jesus Christ.

Scripture points to Christ.

Revelation points to Christ.

The church points to Christ.

Any interpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings should therefore be measured against this standard.

When the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse are read in this way, they appear less controversial.

Their purpose is not to distract from Christ.

Their purpose is to illuminate the significance of Christ.

Humanity possesses divine potential because Christ reveals and mediates divine life.

Creation moves toward fulfillment because Christ reconciles all things.

Theosis occurs through Christ.

Resurrection occurs through Christ.

Glorification occurs through Christ.

In this framework, Joseph Smith's later teachings deepen Christianity rather than replacing it.

Theosis and Restoration

One of the most fruitful bridges between Joseph Smith's later teachings and RLDS theology is the doctrine of theosis.

Theosis teaches that salvation involves participation in God's life.

Human beings are transformed through grace.

They become what God intended them to be.

This doctrine possesses deep roots within Christian history.

The Church Fathers spoke of it repeatedly.

Eastern Christianity preserved it.

Christian mystics explored it.

Joseph Smith's later teachings often sound remarkably similar.

The difference lies primarily in language and emphasis.

From a Restorationist perspective, the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse can be understood as modern expressions of theosis.

Rather than teaching radical novelty, they expand upon an ancient Christian vision.

The Divine Image

The Bible teaches that humanity was created in the image of God.

This simple statement carries enormous implications.

If humanity reflects God, then divine-human communion is not foreign to creation.

It is part of creation's purpose.

The Book of Abraham emphasizes human dignity and eternal significance.

The King Follett Discourse emphasizes humanity's relationship with God.

Both themes naturally arise from the doctrine of the divine image.

The Restoration therefore need not choose between biblical faith and Joseph Smith's later teachings.

The latter can be interpreted as explorations of truths already present within scripture.

Eternal Life as Participation

Traditional Christianity often speaks of eternal life as communion with God.

The Restoration expands this idea.

Eternal life is not merely endless existence.

It is participation in divine reality.

It is growth.

Transformation.

Union.

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse repeatedly move in this direction.

They portray salvation dynamically rather than statically.

The future becomes a living relationship rather than a fixed condition.

Such themes harmonize beautifully with the broader Restoration vision of continuing growth in Christ.

Creation as Ongoing

Another common theme involves creation itself.

Many theological systems portray creation as a completed event.

Joseph Smith often portrayed it as an ongoing process.

The Book of Abraham's creation account reflects order, intelligence, and development.

The King Follett Discourse emphasizes progression and purpose.

The RLDS tradition's later emphasis upon continuing revelation fits naturally within this framework.

God remains active.

History remains meaningful.

Creation remains unfinished.

The Kingdom of God continues unfolding.

This vision resonates strongly with Restoration theology.

Divine Relationality

One of the most beautiful aspects of Joseph Smith's later teachings is the emphasis upon relationship.

God is not distant.

God is near.

God is personal.

God seeks communion.

The King Follett Discourse repeatedly moves toward this theme.

Its purpose is not to reduce God.

Its purpose is to make God accessible.

The Restoration has always emphasized relationship over abstraction.

Prayer.

Revelation.

Spiritual gifts.

Community.

All reflect a relational understanding of faith.

Consequently, Joseph Smith's later teachings fit naturally within the Restoration's broader spiritual vision.

The Problem of Literalism

Many controversies surrounding Joseph Smith's later teachings arise from excessive literalism.

Critics often interpret every statement in the most rigid possible manner.

Some defenders do the same.

Yet religious language frequently operates symbolically, poetically, and analogically.

Mystics throughout history have used bold language to express spiritual realities.

Joseph Smith was no exception.

A rigidly literal reading may miss the deeper purpose of his teachings.

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse often function more like visionary theology than systematic philosophy.

Recognizing this fact opens new possibilities for interpretation.

Cosmic Restoration

Perhaps the greatest point of harmony involves the idea of cosmic restoration.

The Restoration movement began with the conviction that God had not abandoned creation.

Truth could be restored.

The church could be restored.

Humanity could be restored.

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse extend this principle further.

Creation itself moves toward restoration.

History possesses direction.

God's purposes ultimately prevail.

This vision aligns remarkably well with traditions of universal reconciliation and cosmic redemption.

The ultimate goal is not destruction but transformation.

Not abandonment but fulfillment.

Not exclusion but restoration.

Such themes resonate deeply with a Christ-centered Restoration theology.

The RLDS Canon and Continuing Revelation

The Reorganized tradition's acceptance of continuing revelation provides another bridge.

Doctrine and Covenants sections added after Joseph Smith's death demonstrate that revelation did not cease.

If revelation continues, then theological understanding may continue developing as well.

This principle allows Restorationists to approach the Book of Abraham and King Follett Discourse without fear.

Every statement need not function as a final definition.

Instead, these teachings become part of an ongoing conversation between God and God's people.

This approach avoids both rigid dogmatism and dismissive skepticism.

What the Reorganization Preserved

The Reorganization preserved several important principles that help interpret Joseph Smith's later teachings responsibly.

It emphasized:

- Christ above speculation.
- Scripture above rumor.
- Community above personality cults.
- Revelation with accountability.
- Faith seeking understanding.

These principles provide valuable safeguards.

They allow believers to explore Joseph Smith's later teachings without becoming captive to theological excess.

The result is a balanced Restorationism rooted in both revelation and discernment.

Abraham and King Follett Without Brighamite Assumptions

A key insight often overlooked is that one can appreciate the Book of Abraham and King Follett Discourse without adopting every later Brighamite interpretation.

The texts belong to Joseph Smith.

Not exclusively to any later denomination.

Restorationists are free to interpret them through Christ-centered theology, theosis, mystical Christianity, cosmic restoration, and continuing revelation.

This freedom opens rich possibilities.

It allows Joseph Smith's later teachings to remain living sources of reflection rather than frozen artifacts of denominational controversy.

Joseph Smith's Mature Vision

Taken together, the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse reveal Joseph Smith's mature theological vision.

Creation is meaningful.

Human beings possess divine dignity.

God seeks communion with humanity.

History moves toward fulfillment.

Revelation continues.

Death is not the end.

Christ stands at the center of the entire process.

These themes do not undermine Christianity.

They enrich it.

They expand it.

They restore dimensions often neglected in modern religious thought.

The Restoration as an Open Horizon

One of Joseph Smith's greatest contributions may have been his refusal to treat theology as finished.

Truth remained larger than any system.

Revelation remained possible.

The future remained open.

This spirit aligns naturally with the Reorganized tradition's commitment to continuing revelation.

The Restoration is not merely a return to the past.

It is a movement toward God's future.

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse embody this forward-looking vision.

Conclusion

The Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse need not be viewed as obstacles to RLDS Restoration theology.

Properly understood, they can be integrated into a Christ-centered, revelation-oriented, and theosis-informed vision of faith.

Their deepest themes—divine-human communion, transformation, cosmic restoration, continuing revelation, and the ultimate triumph of God's purposes—harmonize naturally with the broader Restoration message.

Rather than representing a departure from Christianity, they may be understood as bold explorations of Christianity's most profound hopes.

With these theological controversies addressed, we now return to Joseph Smith himself.

The final section of this book will examine two enduring accusations against the Prophet:

that he was racist and that the Book of Mormon is a racist book.

These charges have become increasingly common in modern discussions.

Yet, as we shall see, both Joseph Smith's life and the actual text of the Book of Mormon present a far more complex picture than many critics acknowledge.

Part VI

Joseph Smith, Race, and the Book of Mormon

Chapter 22

Was Joseph Smith Racist?

Race, Priesthood, and Nineteenth-Century America

Among modern criticisms directed against Joseph Smith, few have become more common than accusations of racism.

The charge often appears straightforward.

Joseph Smith lived in nineteenth-century America.

The Book of Mormon contains passages discussing skin color.

Later Mormon history included racial restrictions.

Therefore, Joseph Smith must have been racist.

At first glance, the argument appears persuasive.

Upon closer examination, however, the historical evidence presents a much more complicated picture.

As with many controversies surrounding Joseph Smith, critics often combine facts from different periods, different leaders, and different contexts into a single narrative.

The result can be misleading.

To evaluate the accusation fairly, several questions must be considered separately:

- What were Joseph Smith's personal views regarding race?
- How did he treat Black individuals?
- What policies existed during his lifetime?
- Did later racial restrictions originate with him?
- How should passages in the Book of Mormon be interpreted?

Only by addressing these questions individually can a balanced conclusion be reached.

The America Joseph Smith Inherited

Any serious discussion must begin with historical context.

Joseph Smith was born in 1805.

The United States of his youth was deeply shaped by slavery, racial prejudice, and legal inequality.

Many churches defended slavery.

Many politicians defended slavery.

Many ordinary citizens accepted assumptions that modern people rightly reject.

This reality does not excuse prejudice.

It does remind us that historical figures should be evaluated within the world they inhabited.

If the standard is complete freedom from nineteenth-century cultural assumptions, very few Americans of that era will pass the test.

The more meaningful question is whether Joseph Smith merely reflected his environment or moved beyond it in significant ways.

The evidence suggests the latter occurred more often than critics acknowledge.

Black Members in the Early Church

One of the strongest pieces of evidence against the accusation of systematic racism is the presence of Black members in the early Restoration movement.

African Americans joined the church during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

Some occupied respected positions.

Most significantly, Black men received priesthood authority.

The most famous example is Elijah Abel.

Abel was ordained to the priesthood and served as a missionary.

This fact is historically important.

If Joseph Smith believed Black people were permanently excluded from priesthood authority, Abel's ordination becomes difficult to explain.

The historical record strongly suggests that priesthood restrictions associated with later Utah Mormonism did not exist in the same form during Joseph Smith's ministry.

This point deserves emphasis.

Many criticisms directed at Joseph Smith actually concern policies introduced later.

Elijah Abel and the Priesthood

The case of Elijah Abel deserves special attention.

Abel was ordained an elder and later a seventy.

His priesthood standing was publicly recognized.

No evidence demonstrates that Joseph Smith attempted to revoke these ordinations.

Indeed, later controversies concerning Abel arose primarily after Joseph Smith's death.

For the historic RLDS tradition, Abel's experience became important evidence.

If Black men held priesthood office under Joseph Smith, then later racial restrictions could not be attributed confidently to him.

This argument remains powerful.

Historical evidence indicates that priesthood participation by Black members was a reality during the Prophet's lifetime.

Joseph Smith and Slavery

Joseph Smith's views regarding slavery evolved over time.

Like many Americans, his early statements reflected the complicated political environment in which he lived.

As years passed, however, his position became increasingly critical of slavery.

By the 1840s, he openly supported compensated emancipation.

During his presidential campaign, he proposed a plan for ending slavery through federal compensation to slaveholders.

Modern readers may find this proposal imperfect.

Yet in the context of the 1840s, it represented a significant anti-slavery position.

Joseph Smith was not advocating the indefinite continuation of slavery.

He was advocating its gradual abolition.

This distinction matters.

Historical figures should be judged according to the actual positions they held rather than assumptions imposed upon them.

The Presidential Platform

Joseph Smith's 1844 presidential platform remains one of the strongest pieces of evidence regarding his mature views.

He proposed using revenue from public lands and other resources to compensate slaveholders and free enslaved persons.

The proposal reflected both moral concern and political practicality.

Critics sometimes note that Joseph Smith did not embrace every aspect of modern egalitarian thought.

This observation is true.

He was a nineteenth-century American.

Yet the relevant comparison is not with twenty-first-century ideals.

The relevant comparison is with his contemporaries.

By that standard, his anti-slavery proposals appear notably progressive.

Race and Religious Equality

Another important aspect of Joseph Smith's thought involved religious equality.

He repeatedly argued that God is no respecter of persons.

He emphasized the universal scope of the gospel.

Missionary efforts crossed ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries.

The Restoration proclaimed that divine revelation was available to all.

These principles created pressures pushing the movement beyond many contemporary prejudices.

Joseph Smith did not always express these principles perfectly.

Few historical figures do.

Yet the principles themselves remain significant.

They point toward inclusion rather than exclusion.

The Later Priesthood Restriction

One of the greatest sources of confusion arises from later developments in Utah Mormonism.

Under the leadership of Brigham Young, racial restrictions concerning priesthood and temple participation eventually emerged.

These policies remained in place for generations.

Critics frequently project these later developments backward onto Joseph Smith.

The historical evidence does not support such a simple equation.

Whatever one's views concerning Brigham Young, the record demonstrates important differences between his policies and those operating during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

The distinction is crucial.

One should not blame Joseph Smith automatically for decisions made after his death.

The RLDS Position on Race

The Reorganized Church consistently rejected racial priesthood restrictions.

This fact reinforced the traditional RLDS argument that such restrictions originated after Joseph Smith.

The Reorganization pointed to early church history, including the ordination of Elijah Abel, as evidence.

For RLDS writers, racial equality was not a modern innovation.

It represented continuity with the original Restoration.

This perspective became increasingly important as American society confronted questions of civil rights and racial justice.

Problematic Statements

Historical honesty requires acknowledging that Joseph Smith occasionally made statements modern readers may find troubling.

Like many people of his era, he sometimes used language reflecting nineteenth-century assumptions.

Defenders should not ignore such realities.

Joseph Smith was not a twenty-first-century social activist transported into the past.

He was a man shaped by his environment.

Yet isolated statements should not be treated as the whole story.

The broader pattern of his life, policies, and relationships must also be considered.

When viewed holistically, the evidence becomes more favorable than critics often admit.

The Difference Between Prejudice and Policy

An important distinction exists between personal prejudice and institutional policy.

A person may possess cultural assumptions inherited from society while simultaneously supporting policies that expand inclusion.

Many historical reformers exhibited this tension.

Joseph Smith appears to fit this pattern.

He lived within a culture permeated by racial prejudice.

Yet his actions frequently moved toward broader participation rather than restriction.

Black converts joined the church.

Black men held priesthood office.

Slavery faced increasing criticism.

These realities matter.

Historical judgments should reflect actions as well as attitudes.

Why Critics Connect Joseph Smith to Racism

Several factors contribute.

First, later Mormon racial restrictions are well known.

Second, the Book of Mormon contains passages discussing skin color.

Third, modern readers often interpret nineteenth-century language through contemporary categories.

These factors combine to create a powerful narrative.

Yet historical accuracy requires separating distinct issues.

Joseph Smith's personal views.

The Book of Mormon's language.

Brigham Young's policies.

Twentieth-century restrictions.

These subjects are related but not identical.

Confusing them obscures rather than clarifies history.

The Restoration Principle

One of the most important principles within Joseph Smith's theology is the universal scope of salvation.

The gospel was intended for all nations.

All peoples.

All languages.

All cultures.

This conviction shaped missionary efforts from the beginning.

The Restoration was never envisioned as an ethnic religion.

Its message addressed humanity as a whole.

This universal orientation stands in tension with rigid racial exclusion.

Consequently, many Restorationists view later racial restrictions as departures from rather than fulfillments of Joseph Smith's vision.

A Balanced Historical Judgment

Was Joseph Smith completely free from the assumptions of his time?

No.

Was he a modern advocate of racial equality in every respect?

No.

Was he a racial supremacist committed to exclusion and segregation?

The historical evidence does not support that conclusion.

His record is more complex.

He ordained Black men.

He supported emancipation.

He welcomed Black converts.

He proclaimed a universal gospel.

These realities deserve substantial weight.

Historical figures should be evaluated according to the full scope of evidence rather than isolated quotations or later developments.

The RLDS Assessment

The historic RLDS tradition generally viewed Joseph Smith as fundamentally opposed to the racial restrictions that later emerged in Utah Mormonism.

This assessment rested upon concrete evidence rather than sentiment alone.

The ordination of Elijah Abel.

The inclusion of Black members.

The absence of priesthood restrictions.

The anti-slavery elements of Joseph Smith's later political program.

Taken together, these factors suggested continuity with inclusion rather than exclusion.

Whether every RLDS argument succeeds is open to debate.

The broader conclusion, however, remains persuasive:

The historical Joseph Smith appears considerably less racist than many modern critics assume.

Conclusion

The accusation that Joseph Smith was racist often depends upon conflating his life with later developments that occurred after his death.

When the evidence is examined carefully, a different picture emerges.

Joseph Smith lived in a flawed society and shared some assumptions of his era.

Yet he also moved beyond many of those assumptions.

He ordained Black men.

He welcomed Black converts.

He advocated emancipation.

He proclaimed a gospel intended for all humanity.

These facts do not make him perfect.

They do make simplistic accusations increasingly difficult to sustain.

The next chapter addresses an even more controversial issue:

Is the Book of Mormon itself racist?

Critics frequently point to passages concerning skin color and curses as evidence.

Yet many Restorationists argue that such readings misunderstand both the text and its theological message.

To evaluate the question fairly, we must examine the Book of Mormon itself rather than relying upon assumptions about what it supposedly teaches.

Chapter 23

Is the Book of Mormon Racist?

Skin Color, Curses, and the Meaning of the Text

Among contemporary criticisms of the Restoration, few are repeated more frequently than the claim that the Book of Mormon is a racist book.

Critics often point to passages discussing curses, skin color, and divisions between Nephites and Lamanites. These passages are then presented as proof that the book teaches racial superiority, racial hierarchy, or divine favoritism based upon physical appearance.

The accusation is serious.

If true, it would undermine the Book of Mormon's claim to be a divinely inspired witness of Jesus Christ.

A book that teaches racial hatred would stand in direct contradiction to the gospel's universal message.

Yet accusations require careful examination.

The question is not whether difficult passages exist.

They do.

The question is how those passages should be interpreted.

Do they actually teach racism?

Or are modern readers imposing assumptions upon an ancient text?

To answer fairly, we must examine the Book of Mormon as a whole rather than isolating individual verses.

The Purpose of the Book of Mormon

A useful starting point is remembering the stated purpose of the book itself.

The Book of Mormon repeatedly declares that it was written to bring people to Christ.

Its central message concerns faith, repentance, covenant, redemption, resurrection, and salvation.

The book's climax is not racial division.

Its climax is the appearance of Jesus Christ among the people.

This observation may seem obvious, yet it is important.

The overwhelming majority of the text concerns spiritual themes rather than race.

Any interpretation portraying race as the book's primary concern immediately encounters difficulties.

The book itself consistently points elsewhere.

Ancient Peoples, Not Modern Races

One of the greatest obstacles to understanding the Book of Mormon involves the tendency to project modern racial categories into an ancient text.

The Nephites and Lamanites were not modern races.

They were rival covenant communities.

Their conflict was primarily cultural, religious, and political.

Modern concepts of race developed long after the period described in the Book of Mormon.

Consequently, interpreting every reference to physical appearance through modern racial assumptions risks serious misunderstanding.

The text's primary concern involves covenant faithfulness rather than biological ethnicity.

This distinction is essential.

The Nature of the Curse

Critics often point to passages describing a curse placed upon the Lamanites.

The immediate assumption is that the curse consisted of skin color.

Yet careful reading suggests a different possibility.

Throughout scripture, curses generally involve separation from God, loss of covenant blessings, or spiritual alienation.

The Book of Mormon follows this pattern repeatedly.

When prophets discuss the Lamanite curse, they often describe rebellion, unbelief, and estrangement from divine guidance.

The central issue is spiritual condition rather than physical appearance.

Whatever one concludes regarding references to skin color, the broader context consistently points toward covenant status as the primary concern.

What Does "Skin" Mean?

Another important question concerns language itself.

Ancient texts frequently employ symbolic imagery.

Light and darkness often represent righteousness and wickedness.

White garments symbolize purity.

Darkness symbolizes separation from truth.

Such imagery appears throughout scripture.

Consequently, some Restoration scholars have suggested that references to skin may carry symbolic or covenantal significance rather than functioning solely as biological descriptions.

Not every reader accepts this interpretation.

Yet it deserves consideration.

Ancient religious literature often speaks in symbolic language.

Modern literalism can sometimes obscure rather than clarify meaning.

The Possibility of Cultural Markers

Another interpretation proposes that visible cultural markers may be involved.

Throughout history, groups have distinguished themselves through clothing, body paint, tattoos, hairstyles, or other external signs.

The Book of Mormon occasionally emphasizes separation between communities.

It is therefore possible that certain descriptions refer to social or cultural distinctions rather than race in the modern sense.

Again, certainty remains difficult.

The important point is that multiple interpretations exist.

The racist reading is not the only available option.

The Book's Treatment of the Lamanites

One of the strongest arguments against the accusation of racism emerges from the Book of Mormon's overall portrayal of the Lamanites themselves.

If the book were truly racist, one would expect Lamanites to remain permanently inferior.

The text does not support such a conclusion.

Repeatedly, righteous Lamanites appear.

Many become more faithful than the Nephites.

Prophets praise them.

Missionaries serve among them.

Entire narratives celebrate their conversion and spiritual strength.

Indeed, at several points in the record the Nephites become more wicked than the Lamanites.

This reversal is significant.

The book consistently judges people according to righteousness rather than ancestry.

God Is No Respecter of Persons

Perhaps the most important principle in the Book of Mormon is the repeated affirmation that God invites all people to come unto Him.

One of the clearest statements appears in the teaching that God denies none who come unto Him, "black and white, bond and free, male and female."

This passage is extraordinarily significant.

Far from promoting racial hierarchy, it proclaims spiritual equality.

The message is unmistakable.

Salvation is universal.

Divine love is universal.

Access to Christ is universal.

Any interpretation of difficult passages must be reconciled with these explicit declarations.

The book cannot reasonably be understood by ignoring its clearest teachings.

The Lamanites as Covenant Heirs

Another often-overlooked feature of the Book of Mormon is its positive view of the future of the Lamanites.

The text repeatedly promises their restoration.

Prophecies describe them receiving divine blessings.

They are not portrayed as permanently rejected.

Quite the opposite.

God's concern for them forms a major theme throughout the book.

This emphasis differs sharply from genuinely racist literature, which typically portrays certain groups as permanently inferior or beyond redemption.

The Book of Mormon does neither.

Its vision is restorative rather than exclusionary.

The Universal Mission of Christ

The appearance of Christ in the Book of Mormon provides an important lens for interpretation.

When the risen Christ ministers among the people, He does not establish racial hierarchy.

He invites all to come unto Him.

He heals.

He teaches.

He blesses.

His ministry reflects the universal scope of the gospel.

This event serves as the theological center of the entire book.

Consequently, interpretations that reduce the Book of Mormon to racial ideology struggle to account for its central narrative.

The book's heart is Christ, not ethnicity.

Joseph Smith's Interpretation

The historical Joseph Smith also provides important context.

As discussed in the previous chapter, he welcomed converts from diverse backgrounds.

He ordained Black men.

He advocated the spread of the gospel to all nations.

These actions suggest that he did not understand the Book of Mormon as teaching racial superiority.

Whatever difficult passages may mean, Joseph Smith's own behavior points toward inclusion rather than exclusion.

This observation does not settle every interpretive question.

It does provide useful evidence concerning how the book was understood by its translator.

The RLDS Perspective

The historic RLDS tradition generally emphasized the universal message of the Book of Mormon.

Reorganized writers focused upon its witness of Christ, its call to repentance, and its teachings regarding covenant and discipleship.

While acknowledging difficult passages, they resisted interpretations portraying the book as fundamentally racist.

This approach reflected a broader principle.

Individual verses should be interpreted within the context of the book's overall message.

When that message is considered as a whole, the emphasis falls overwhelmingly upon spiritual equality before God.

Difficult Passages Remain

A balanced defense must acknowledge reality.

Some passages remain challenging.

Modern readers naturally struggle with language involving skin color and curses.

Defenders should not pretend otherwise.

Historical and textual questions remain.

Interpretation remains necessary.

Yet the existence of difficult passages does not automatically determine the meaning of an entire book.

Many ancient religious texts contain language requiring careful contextualization.

The Book of Mormon is no exception.

The proper response is thoughtful interpretation rather than simplistic dismissal.

Racism Versus Ancient Worldviews

Another important distinction involves the difference between modern racism and ancient covenant thinking.

Modern racism generally emphasizes biological hierarchy.

Ancient religious texts more often emphasize covenant identity, religious loyalty, and divine relationship.

The Book of Mormon consistently operates within the latter framework.

Its judgments concern righteousness and wickedness rather than immutable racial categories.

Groups rise and fall spiritually.

They repent.

They apostatize.

They change.

This fluidity differs fundamentally from racial ideologies based upon fixed biological superiority.

The Fruits of the Book

One useful question concerns the fruits produced by the text.

For nearly two centuries, readers have found within the Book of Mormon teachings concerning faith, forgiveness, redemption, charity, resurrection, and hope.

Missionaries have used it to proclaim Christ.

Believers have used it to deepen spiritual life.

The book's influence has generally pointed toward devotion rather than racial hostility.

This observation does not eliminate interpretive challenges.

It does suggest that the text's central impact differs dramatically from what one would expect if racism constituted its primary message.

A Restorationist Reading

From a Restorationist perspective, the Book of Mormon should be interpreted through its highest principles.

God invites all people to come unto Him.

Christ died for all.

Salvation is available to all.

Human worth derives from divine creation rather than ancestry.

The future involves restoration and reconciliation.

These themes dominate the text.

Difficult passages must therefore be understood in harmony with these broader truths rather than in opposition to them.

Such an approach remains faithful both to the text itself and to the larger message of the Restoration.

The Book's Final Vision

The final vision of the Book of Mormon is not racial separation.

It is universal redemption through Christ.

The book ends with invitations rather than exclusions.

Its prophets address future generations.

Its message extends beyond nations, tribes, and peoples.

The ultimate concern is not bloodline.

It is discipleship.

Not ethnicity.

But covenant.

Not race.

But Christ.

This emphasis should guide interpretation.

Conclusion

The accusation that the Book of Mormon is racist rests largely upon reading a handful of difficult passages apart from the broader context of the text.

When examined as a whole, a different picture emerges.

The book proclaims a universal gospel.

It repeatedly teaches that God judges according to righteousness rather than ancestry.

It celebrates righteous individuals from every group.

It promises restoration rather than permanent rejection.

Most importantly, it centers everything upon Jesus Christ.

Difficult questions remain.

Interpretive challenges remain.

Yet the claim that the Book of Mormon fundamentally teaches racism becomes increasingly difficult to sustain when the book is read in its entirety.

The next chapter will draw together the evidence concerning Joseph Smith, race, and the Book of Mormon and examine how later racial restrictions emerged in Utah Mormonism despite the more inclusive patterns visible in early Restoration history.

Chapter 24

Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Origins of Racial Restrictions

Separating the Prophet from Later Developments

One of the greatest challenges facing historians is the tendency to read history backward.

Later developments often become projected onto earlier periods.

The result is a simplified narrative in which distinctions disappear and complexities are forgotten.

Few examples illustrate this problem more clearly than discussions of race within Restoration history.

Modern critics frequently begin with the racial restrictions that existed within the Utah church for much of its history.

They then assume those restrictions must have originated with Joseph Smith.

The assumption appears natural.

Yet assumptions are not evidence.

Historical inquiry requires a different approach.

Rather than beginning with later policies and working backward, we must begin with Joseph Smith's own ministry and move forward.

Only then can we determine whether continuity or discontinuity exists.

The answer has significant implications not only for understanding Joseph Smith but also for understanding the broader history of the Restoration.

The Historical Record Under Joseph Smith

The evidence from Joseph Smith's lifetime presents a relatively clear pattern.

Black individuals joined the church.

Black men received priesthood authority.

Missionary service occurred.

Church participation occurred.

No comprehensive racial priesthood ban existed.

The most important example remains Elijah Abel.

His ordination is not merely an isolated detail.

It is a historical fact carrying enormous significance.

If Joseph Smith believed Black individuals were permanently excluded from priesthood authority, Abel's experience becomes difficult to explain.

The simplest reading of the evidence suggests that no such exclusion existed.

This conclusion does not solve every question.

It does establish an important baseline.

Joseph Smith's Expanding Views

Another important feature of Joseph Smith's life involves development.

Like many historical figures, his views evolved.

His early statements sometimes reflected the assumptions of nineteenth-century America.

As time passed, however, his position increasingly emphasized inclusion and emancipation.

This pattern appears in his political thought.

It appears in his presidential platform.

It appears in his interactions with church members.

Such development should not surprise us.

Human beings learn.

Experience changes perspectives.

The important point is direction.

Joseph Smith's mature trajectory generally moved toward broader inclusion rather than narrower exclusion.

The Post-Martyrdom Transition

The death of Joseph Smith created a period of uncertainty.

Leadership changed.

Communities reorganized.

New challenges emerged.

Under such circumstances, religious movements often evolve.

The Restoration was no exception.

The critical historical question is whether later racial policies reflected continuity with Joseph Smith or represented a departure.

The historic RLDS tradition consistently argued for departure.

According to this view, racial restrictions arose after Joseph Smith's death and should not be attributed automatically to him.

The evidence supporting this argument deserves serious consideration.

Brigham Young and Race

The historical record concerning Brigham Young differs significantly from that of Joseph Smith.

Brigham Young made statements concerning race that reflected widespread assumptions of his era.

More importantly, racial restrictions eventually emerged under his leadership.

These restrictions became institutionalized.

Over time, they affected priesthood ordination and temple participation.

The contrast with Joseph Smith's earlier practices became increasingly apparent.

This contrast lies at the heart of the RLDS argument.

If priesthood participation existed under Joseph Smith and restrictions emerged later, then historical continuity becomes difficult to establish.

The RLDS Interpretation

For generations, RLDS writers emphasized precisely this point.

They argued that Joseph Smith's ministry demonstrated openness while later Utah policies reflected exclusion.

The ordination of Elijah Abel became a central piece of evidence.

So did Joseph Smith's anti-slavery proposals.

So did the absence of documented racial restrictions during his presidency.

Taken together, these facts suggested that the original Restoration possessed a more inclusive character than later developments.

Whether every aspect of the RLDS argument succeeds is open to debate.

Its core observation remains powerful.

Important differences exist between Joseph Smith's record and later policies.

The Influence of Nineteenth-Century America

Historical context remains essential.

Neither Joseph Smith nor Brigham Young lived outside history.

Both were shaped by their environment.

Both operated within a society deeply marked by racial inequality.

This reality complicates simplistic moral judgments.

At the same time, context does not eliminate responsibility.

Historical figures made choices.

Some challenged prevailing assumptions.

Others reinforced them.

The relevant question is not whether Joseph Smith was a perfect modern egalitarian.

The relevant question is whether he moved beyond the norms of his day in meaningful ways.

The evidence suggests that he often did.

The Book of Mormon and Inclusion

The Book of Mormon itself reinforces this conclusion.

Its central message is universal.

God invites all people to come unto Him.

Christ ministers to all.

Salvation is offered to all.

Righteousness rather than ancestry determines divine approval.

These themes appear repeatedly throughout the text.

They provide an important interpretive framework.

If Joseph Smith understood the Book of Mormon as teaching universal access to divine grace, then his inclusive practices become easier to understand.

The theology and the historical record reinforce one another.

The Problem of Retroactive Attribution

One of the recurring patterns in religious history involves retroactive attribution.

Later practices are projected backward onto founding figures in order to provide legitimacy.

This process can occur consciously or unconsciously.

The historic RLDS tradition argued that such projection occurred regarding both plural marriage and racial restrictions.

Whether one accepts this conclusion entirely or not, the possibility deserves consideration.

Historical movements frequently reinterpret founders through the lens of later developments.

Consequently, historians must distinguish carefully between what a founder actually taught and what later followers believed he taught.

The 1978 Revelation and Historical Reflection

The eventual removal of priesthood restrictions by the Utah church created an interesting historical situation.

If the restriction itself was divinely mandated and permanent, why remove it?

Different answers have been proposed.

The historic RLDS interpretation viewed the change as indirect confirmation that the restriction did not belong to the original Restoration.

From this perspective, inclusion represented a return rather than an innovation.

Others interpret the matter differently.

Regardless of one's conclusion, the change invites renewed examination of early Restoration history.

It encourages historians to revisit assumptions rather than merely repeating inherited narratives.

Joseph Smith and Human Dignity

One of the strongest themes running through Joseph Smith's teachings is the dignity of the human person.

The Restoration emphasized divine potential.

Human beings were children of God.

The gospel addressed all nations.

The purpose of salvation was transformation and communion with God.

Such themes naturally undermine rigid racial hierarchy.

If all people share a common divine origin and destiny, racial superiority becomes increasingly difficult to justify.

This theological principle may be one of Joseph Smith's most important contributions to discussions of human equality.

The Witness of Early Restoration Practice

Practice often reveals belief more clearly than theory.

Whatever isolated statements may be cited, the actual practice of the early church remains significant.

Black converts joined.

Black men received priesthood authority.

No systematic racial exclusion characterized the movement.

These facts matter.

They represent lived realities rather than abstract theories.

Historical judgments should pay close attention to such evidence.

Actions frequently reveal priorities more clearly than rhetoric.

The Reorganized Church and Racial Equality

The Reorganized Church continued emphasizing these themes.

Its rejection of racial priesthood restrictions reflected its understanding of Joseph Smith's legacy.

For RLDS believers, equality was not a concession to modern culture.

It was a continuation of principles present from the beginning.

This perspective shaped the movement's approach to race throughout much of its history.

The connection between early Restoration inclusiveness and later RLDS practice became an important element of denominational identity.

A Fair Historical Assessment

A fair assessment should avoid both extremes.

Joseph Smith was not a modern civil-rights activist.

He occasionally expressed assumptions typical of his era.

At the same time, he was not the architect of later racial restrictions.

The evidence does not support that conclusion.

His ministry demonstrates significant openness.

His policies demonstrate inclusion.

His theology points toward universal participation in God's work.

Historical accuracy requires acknowledging all of these realities simultaneously.

Why This Matters

Some readers may wonder why these questions remain important.

The answer is simple.

Historical memory shapes identity.

How people understand Joseph Smith influences how they understand the Restoration.

If Joseph Smith was fundamentally committed to racial exclusion, then modern Restoration traditions face one set of challenges.

If he was moving toward greater inclusion, then the story looks very different.

The evidence increasingly supports the latter interpretation.

This conclusion does not require idealizing Joseph Smith.

It simply requires evaluating him fairly.

The Broader Pattern

When viewed alongside earlier chapters, an interesting pattern emerges.

Many accusations against Joseph Smith involve attributing later developments to him.

Polygamy.

Racial restrictions.

Various theological systems.

In each case, the historic RLDS tradition urged caution.

It insisted upon distinguishing Joseph Smith's actual teachings from subsequent interpretations.

Whether one agrees with every RLDS conclusion, this methodological principle remains valuable.

Founders deserve to be evaluated according to their own words and actions rather than assumptions imposed by later history.

Toward a Final Assessment

By this point in our study, several themes have become clear.

Joseph Smith was neither the saint of legend nor the villain of popular criticism.

He was a complex historical figure.

Yet many of the most common accusations prove weaker upon closer examination.

The evidence concerning race provides another example.

Simplistic narratives collapse when confronted with the actual historical record.

Complexity replaces caricature.

History becomes more interesting—and more truthful.

Conclusion

The origins of racial restrictions appear more closely connected to post-Joseph developments than to Joseph Smith himself.

The early Restoration demonstrated significant inclusiveness.

The Book of Mormon proclaimed a universal gospel.

Black men received priesthood authority.

Joseph Smith increasingly supported emancipation and broader participation.

These realities do not erase every difficulty.

They do challenge simplistic accusations.

As we approach the conclusion of this book, we are now prepared to draw together the major themes explored throughout our journey.

The final chapters will evaluate Joseph Smith's legacy as a whole, consider the strengths and weaknesses of the major accusations brought against him, and assess what the Reorganized tradition offers to modern seekers interested in the Restoration.

Chapter 25

Joseph Smith on Trial

Weighing the Evidence and the Accusations

After nearly two centuries, Joseph Smith remains one of the most controversial religious figures in American history.

To some, he was a prophet.

To others, a fraud.

To still others, a sincere but mistaken visionary.

Books have been written defending him.

Books have been written attacking him.

Entire religious movements have emerged from competing interpretations of his life.

Yet beneath the debates lies a simple question:

What does the evidence actually support?

If Joseph Smith were placed on trial before the court of history, what verdict would be justified?

This chapter does not ask whether every claim made by Joseph Smith can be proven.

Neither does it assume that every criticism is false.

Instead, it seeks to weigh the evidence carefully and fairly.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is historical balance.

The Problem of Historical Memory

One difficulty confronting any study of Joseph Smith is the nature of historical memory itself.

Supporters often remember him as a heroic prophet.

Critics often remember him as a religious charlatan.

Both tendencies simplify reality.

Historical figures are rarely one-dimensional.

The more influential a person becomes, the more likely competing myths emerge.

Joseph Smith has inspired both admiration and hostility on an extraordinary scale.

Consequently, separating evidence from legend becomes essential.

The task is not easy.

Yet it remains necessary.

The Fraud Accusation

Perhaps the oldest accusation is that Joseph Smith knowingly invented his religious claims.

According to this theory, he consciously deceived followers for personal gain.

At first glance, the accusation appears plausible.

Joseph Smith produced new scripture.

He claimed visions.

He exercised religious authority.

Such activities naturally invite skepticism.

Yet the fraud theory encounters significant difficulties.

Most importantly, it struggles to explain Joseph Smith's willingness to endure suffering.

Fraudulent religious leaders generally seek comfort, wealth, and security.

Joseph Smith repeatedly encountered persecution, imprisonment, violence, and ultimately death.

This does not prove prophetic inspiration.

It does make conscious fraud less convincing.

The evidence suggests sincerity even if one rejects his claims.

The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon remains central.

Critics argue that it originated through Joseph Smith's imagination.

Believers regard it as ancient scripture.

The debate continues.

Yet certain facts remain noteworthy.

The book displays remarkable complexity.

It presents a coherent theological vision.

It has inspired millions of readers.

Its influence far exceeds what one might expect from a simple frontier fabrication.

None of these observations prove divine origin.

They do challenge simplistic explanations.

The Book of Mormon remains a phenomenon demanding explanation.

The Character Question

Many criticisms of Joseph Smith ultimately concern character.

Was he honest?

Was he trustworthy?

Did he manipulate followers?

Historical evidence reveals both strengths and weaknesses.

Joseph Smith could be impulsive.

He could be bold.

He occasionally exercised poor judgment.

Yet he also demonstrated courage, loyalty, generosity, and resilience.

The overall portrait differs substantially from caricatures portraying him as a cynical deceiver.

Even many non-believing historians acknowledge his sincerity.

The debate increasingly concerns whether he was inspired rather than whether he was intentionally fraudulent.

The Polygamy Question Revisited

No accusation remains more contested than plural marriage.

As we have seen, the historical record is complex.

The Utah tradition generally concludes that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

The historic RLDS tradition reached the opposite conclusion.

Evidence exists on both sides.

What can reasonably be said?

At minimum, the issue remains more complicated than popular presentations often suggest.

The existence of serious historical disagreement indicates that certainty should be approached cautiously.

The traditional RLDS defense deserves consideration even from those who ultimately reach different conclusions.

The Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham presents genuine challenges.

Modern Egyptology raises questions regarding traditional assumptions.

At the same time, multiple interpretations remain possible.

Missing papyri.

Catalyst theories.

Broader concepts of revelation.

These possibilities do not resolve every difficulty.

They do demonstrate that simplistic disproof claims are premature.

The Book of Abraham controversy remains significant.

It is not necessarily decisive.

The King Follett Discourse

Critics often present the King Follett Discourse as evidence that Joseph Smith abandoned Christianity.

Closer examination suggests a more nuanced picture.

Themes of theosis, divine-human communion, transformation, and glorification possess deep roots within Christian history.

Joseph Smith expressed these ideas in distinctive ways.

Yet distinctiveness is not equivalent to rejection.

The discourse can be understood as a bold exploration of Christianity's highest hopes rather than a departure from them.

Race and the Historical Record

Accusations of racism similarly become less persuasive upon closer examination.

Joseph Smith lived within a flawed society.

Yet his actions frequently moved toward inclusion.

Black converts joined the church.

Black men held priesthood office.

Anti-slavery sentiments became increasingly prominent in his later years.

These facts complicate attempts to portray him as a racial exclusionist.

The historical evidence points toward a more inclusive vision than later developments sometimes reflected.

The Dictator Narrative

Claims that Joseph Smith was a dictator encounter similar difficulties.

He possessed authority.

He exercised influence.

Yet membership remained voluntary.

Dissent existed.

Councils operated.

Votes occurred.

The historical record reveals a charismatic religious leader rather than a totalitarian ruler.

Authority and dictatorship are not identical.

Critics often blur the distinction.

History suggests greater nuance.

The Succession Question

The events following Joseph Smith's death further complicate simplistic narratives.

If his teachings and intentions were entirely obvious, the succession crisis would not have occurred.

The emergence of multiple Restoration traditions demonstrates that competing interpretations existed from the beginning.

The Reorganization's alternative narrative therefore cannot be dismissed as a later invention.

It emerged from genuine historical ambiguities.

This reality remains important.

What the RLDS Tradition Preserved

One of the great contributions of the historic RLDS tradition is methodological.

It consistently challenged assumptions.

It asked difficult questions.

It distinguished Joseph Smith from later developments.

It preserved alternative interpretations of Restoration history.

Even where one disagrees with RLDS conclusions, the questions it raised remain valuable.

Historical inquiry benefits from multiple perspectives.

Without the Reorganization, important evidence and arguments might have been forgotten.

Joseph Smith as a Religious Reformer

Beyond specific controversies lies a broader reality.

Joseph Smith changed religious history.

He restored interest in revelation.

He challenged rigid theological boundaries.

He inspired missionary movements.

He produced scripture.

He created communities.

Few religious figures have exercised comparable influence.

Whether one views him as prophet, reformer, visionary, or something else entirely, his significance cannot reasonably be denied.

History remembers him because history was changed by him.

The Human Joseph Smith

An important lesson emerges from serious study.

Joseph Smith was profoundly human.

He was not flawless.

He made mistakes.

He experienced doubt, frustration, and disappointment.

At times he acted unwisely.

Recognizing these realities does not destroy faith.

In many ways it strengthens historical understanding.

The Restoration need not depend upon an infallible founder.

The biblical tradition certainly does not.

God frequently works through imperfect individuals.

The question is not whether Joseph Smith was flawless.

The question is whether he was called.

The Fruits of the Restoration

Another way of evaluating Joseph Smith involves examining fruits.

What emerged from his ministry?

The Book of Mormon.

Communities of faith.

Missionary movements.

Spiritual experiences.

A renewed belief in revelation.

A vision of humanity's divine destiny.

Not every fruit has been positive.

History rarely works that way.

Yet the overall legacy remains substantial.

Movements endure because they meet genuine human and spiritual needs.

The Restoration continues because something meaningful occurred.

A Verdict of History

Can history prove Joseph Smith was a prophet?

No.

Historical methods cannot verify revelation in the same way they verify dates or documents.

Can history prove he was a fraud?

The evidence appears insufficient.

The deeper one studies Joseph Smith, the harder conscious deception becomes to sustain.

The most balanced historical judgment may be this:

Joseph Smith was a sincere religious visionary whose life and teachings transformed countless lives.

Whether that vision originated from divine revelation ultimately remains a matter of faith.

History can illuminate the question.

It cannot answer it completely.

The Restoration Beyond Polemics

One unfortunate feature of Restoration history is the tendency toward polemics.

Supporters sometimes ignore difficulties.

Critics sometimes ignore strengths.

The result is distortion.

A more mature approach recognizes complexity.

Joseph Smith deserves neither blind adoration nor reflexive condemnation.

He deserves careful study.

Truth has little to fear from honest investigation.

Indeed, honest investigation often strengthens rather than weakens faith.

Why Joseph Smith Still Matters

Joseph Smith matters because the questions he raised remain relevant.

Can God still speak?

Can revelation continue?

Can humanity be transformed?

Does history possess divine purpose?

Is restoration possible?

These questions transcend denominational boundaries.

Even those who reject Joseph Smith's answers often continue wrestling with the questions themselves.

His enduring significance lies partly in his willingness to ask them.

Conclusion

When Joseph Smith is placed on trial before the court of history, the evidence proves more favorable than many critics assume.

The accusations are often weaker than popular presentations suggest.

The controversies are often more complex than either defenders or detractors admit.

The historical Joseph Smith emerges not as a monster, not as a fool, and not as an obvious fraud.

He emerges as a remarkable religious figure whose life continues to challenge, inspire, and provoke debate.

The final chapter of this book will move beyond controversy and ask a more constructive question:

What does Joseph Smith's legacy mean for the future of the Restoration?

There, we will consider the enduring relevance of the Reorganized tradition and the continuing call to restoration in the modern world.

Chapter 26

The Future of the Restoration

Joseph Smith's Enduring Legacy

Every generation inherits the past.

The question is what it chooses to do with it.

This truth applies especially to the Restoration.

Nearly two centuries have passed since Joseph Smith knelt in prayer and reported a vision that would alter the course of religious history. Nearly two centuries have passed since the publication of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the church, the gathering of believers, the persecutions, the migrations, the martyrdom, and the succession crisis.

Yet the Restoration remains.

It survives not because every question has been answered.

It survives because the questions Joseph Smith raised continue to matter.

Can God still speak?

Can revelation continue?

Can Christianity be renewed?

Can humanity move closer to God?

Can history be transformed?

These questions remain as relevant today as they were in 1830.

The future of the Restoration therefore depends not merely upon preserving the past but upon understanding its meaning.

Beyond Defending Joseph Smith

Throughout this book we have examined accusations against Joseph Smith.

We have explored controversies concerning fraud, dictatorship, polygamy, race, the Book of Abraham, the King Follett Discourse, and succession.

Such discussions are necessary.

Historical claims deserve investigation.

Misunderstandings deserve correction.

Yet a Restoration centered solely upon defending Joseph Smith would be incomplete.

Joseph Smith himself repeatedly pointed beyond himself.

His purpose was not personal glorification.

His purpose was to direct people toward God.

Consequently, the ultimate question is not whether Joseph Smith can be defended.

The ultimate question is whether the truths he sought to restore continue to possess spiritual power.

If they do, the Restoration has a future.

If they do not, historical arguments become largely irrelevant.

The Enduring Principles of the Restoration

Many specific controversies have divided Restoration traditions.

Yet several principles remain remarkably enduring.

Among them are:

- Continuing revelation.
- The possibility of divine encounter.
- The sacred worth of every human being.

- The importance of scripture.
- The reality of spiritual gifts.
- The call to build Zion.
- The centrality of Jesus Christ.

These principles transcend denominational boundaries.

They speak to universal human concerns.

They address questions that remain unresolved within modern society.

For this reason, the Restoration continues attracting seekers.

Its message remains alive.

The Reorganized Contribution

The historic RLDS tradition made a unique contribution to Restoration history.

It preserved an alternative memory.

It defended Joseph Smith against accusations it believed unjust.

It rejected doctrines it viewed as later innovations.

It emphasized Christ-centered faith.

It maintained belief in continuing revelation.

It preserved the possibility that one could be fully Restorationist without accepting every development associated with Utah Mormonism.

This contribution remains significant.

Even those who disagree with specific RLDS conclusions benefit from the questions it raised.

Historical inquiry is healthier when multiple voices are heard.

Restoration and Christianity

One of the greatest strengths of the Reorganized tradition lies in its insistence that the Restoration belongs within the broader Christian story.

The Restoration was not intended to replace Christ.

It was intended to testify of Christ.

It was not intended to create a separate deity or a separate gospel.

It was intended to renew awareness of divine presence and divine purpose.

This emphasis remains valuable.

In an age increasingly marked by religious fragmentation, the Restoration can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier.

It can invite dialogue rather than isolation.

It can encourage renewal rather than division.

Theosis and Human Destiny

As we explored in the chapters on the Book of Abraham and the King Follett Discourse, one of Joseph Smith's most profound contributions may have been his vision of human destiny.

Human beings are not merely sinners awaiting judgment.

They are children of God called to transformation.

The purpose of salvation is communion.

Participation.

Growth.

Glorification.

This vision resonates strongly with ancient Christian teachings concerning theosis.

It also speaks powerfully to modern spiritual seekers.

People long for meaning.

They long for transcendence.

They long for transformation.

The Restoration offers a hopeful answer.

Human destiny is not alienation.

Human destiny is union with God.

Zion as a Living Ideal

The future of the Restoration also depends upon recovering the meaning of Zion.

Too often Zion has been reduced to geography.

A location.

A settlement.

A destination.

Yet the deepest Restoration understanding of Zion transcends place.

Zion is a way of life.

A covenant community.

A society rooted in justice, compassion, and reconciliation.

Wherever people seek peace, truth, and mutual care, the spirit of Zion begins to appear.

This understanding possesses enormous relevance today.

Modern societies face division, loneliness, inequality, and distrust.

The Restoration's vision of Zion offers an alternative.

Continuing Revelation in the Modern World

Perhaps no Restoration principle appears more radical than continuing revelation.

Many religious traditions speak primarily of what God has done.

The Restoration insists that God is still acting.

Still speaking.

Still guiding.

This conviction does not require abandoning scripture.

Rather, it treats scripture as part of an ongoing relationship between God and humanity.

The Reorganized tradition embodied this principle through continuing additions to the Doctrine and Covenants, eventually extending beyond Section 144 and continuing further in later years.

The heavens remain open.

This belief remains one of the Restoration's greatest strengths.

A Restoration for All People

Another important aspect of the future involves inclusiveness.

The Restoration began with a universal message.

The gospel was intended for all nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples.

Joseph Smith's later anti-slavery proposals, the ordination of Black priesthood holders such as Elijah Abel, and the Book of Mormon's repeated declarations that God invites all to come unto Him point toward this universal vision.

The future of the Restoration must remain faithful to that principle.

No people are outside God's concern.

No nation is beyond redemption.

No individual is beyond grace.

This conviction lies at the heart of the gospel itself.

Learning from History

The Restoration also benefits from historical humility.

Every tradition makes mistakes.

Every institution faces challenges.

Every generation misunderstands some aspects of the past.

The purpose of historical study is not merely to prove ourselves right.

It is to learn.

The historic RLDS tradition often reminded believers that founders and successors alike should be examined carefully.

This lesson remains valuable.

Faith need not fear truth.

Indeed, genuine faith welcomes it.

The future of the Restoration depends partly upon maintaining that openness.

Joseph Smith's Greatest Legacy

What, then, is Joseph Smith's greatest legacy?

Different people will answer differently.

Some will point to the Book of Mormon.

Others to continuing revelation.

Others to the restoration of priesthood authority.

Others to temple theology.

From a broader perspective, perhaps his greatest legacy is hope.

Hope that God still speaks.

Hope that humanity can change.

Hope that history possesses meaning.

Hope that restoration is possible.

These themes appear repeatedly throughout his life and teachings.

They remain compelling today.

The Restoration and the Modern Seeker

Modern seekers often find themselves caught between skepticism and longing.

Many distrust institutions.

Many struggle with traditional dogmas.

Yet many still hunger for spiritual reality.

The Restoration speaks directly to this condition.

It affirms that revelation is possible.

It affirms that divine encounter remains real.

It affirms that spiritual growth continues.

It affirms that faith and inquiry need not be enemies.

For this reason, the Restoration continues attracting thoughtful individuals even in an increasingly secular age.

Its questions remain alive because the human search for meaning remains alive.

The Reorganized Vision

The historic Reorganized vision offers a distinctive path forward.

It preserves commitment to Joseph Smith while maintaining openness to historical inquiry.

It embraces continuing revelation while emphasizing accountability.

It values scripture while encouraging thoughtful interpretation.

It affirms Restoration distinctives while remaining deeply Christian.

This balance may be one of its greatest gifts.

In a world often polarized between rigid certainty and total skepticism, the Reorganized tradition demonstrates another possibility.

Faith seeking understanding.

A Final Reflection on Joseph Smith

After examining the accusations, controversies, teachings, and legacy of Joseph Smith, one conclusion seems increasingly difficult to avoid.

The historical Joseph Smith was far more complex than either critics or admirers often admit.

He was a visionary.

A reformer.

A prophet to believers.

A challenge to skeptics.

A man capable of inspiring extraordinary devotion and equally extraordinary opposition.

Yet beneath the controversy stands a figure whose influence continues.

The questions he raised have not disappeared.

Neither has the movement he founded.

That alone suggests that something significant occurred.

The Restoration Continues

The Restoration is not merely a historical event.

It is a continuing invitation.

An invitation to seek God.

To pursue truth.

To build Zion.

To embrace revelation.

To participate in the healing of creation.

The work is unfinished.

Every generation receives the invitation anew.

The future of the Restoration therefore depends not only upon Joseph Smith or any particular denomination.

It depends upon those willing to continue the search.

Final Conclusion

This book began with controversy.

It ends with possibility.

The purpose has never been merely to win arguments.

The purpose has been to understand.

To examine accusations carefully.

To explore evidence fairly.

To appreciate the contributions of the historic Reorganized tradition.

And above all, to reconsider Joseph Smith in a more balanced light.

Whether one ultimately accepts Joseph Smith as prophet, reformer, visionary, or something else entirely, his impact upon religious history is undeniable.

The Restoration he initiated continues to challenge, inspire, and provoke reflection.

For those who stand within the Reorganized tradition, the message remains clear:

The Restoration was never about exalting a man.

It was about pointing humanity toward God.

And that work remains unfinished.

The end.

Appendix A

A Timeline of the Life of Joseph Smith

1805–1844

> *"I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion."* — Joseph Smith Jr.

This appendix presents a chronological overview of the life of Joseph Smith from his birth in 1805 to his martyrdom in 1844. It is written from a Restorationist perspective informed by the historic RLDS tradition and is intended to provide context for the events discussed throughout this volume.

1805

December 23, 1805

Joseph Smith Jr. is born in Sharon to:

- Joseph Smith Sr.
- Lucy Mack Smith

He is the fifth surviving child in the Smith family.

1807–1815

Early Childhood

The Smith family experiences financial instability and repeated relocations.

Joseph suffers a severe leg infection as a child.

A complicated operation is performed without modern anesthesia.

The surgery succeeds and saves his leg.

This experience leaves a lasting impression upon him and his family.

1816

Move to Western New York

The Smith family relocates to the region later known as the "Burned-over District."

This area becomes famous for intense religious revivalism.

Competing churches and revival movements are common.

These circumstances form the backdrop for Joseph's later religious questions.

1818–1819

Religious Confusion

Joseph begins wrestling with competing religious claims.

Methodists.

Presbyterians.

Baptists.

Various revivalist groups.

Each claims authority.

Each claims truth.

Joseph later recalls feeling deeply troubled by these conflicting voices.

1820

The First Vision

According to Joseph Smith's testimony:

After reading James 1:5—

> "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God"

—he enters a grove of trees near his home to pray.

There he experiences a vision.

He reports seeing God the Father and Jesus Christ.

He is told not to join any existing denomination.

This event becomes the foundational revelation of the Restoration.

The exact dating of the vision has been debated, but the traditional Restoration date remains 1820.

1823

September 21–22, 1823

Joseph reports angelic visitations from Moroni.

Moroni informs him of:

- Ancient plates
- A sacred record
- Future prophetic responsibilities

Joseph is instructed regarding the location of the plates.

1824–1826

Annual Visits to the Hill

Joseph returns annually to the hill where the plates are reportedly concealed.

He receives instruction but is not yet permitted to remove them.

These years become a period of preparation.

1827

Marriage to Emma Hale

Joseph marries:

Emma Hale Smith

The marriage occurs despite opposition from Emma's father.

The couple remains together until Joseph's death.

September 22, 1827

Joseph reports receiving the gold plates from Moroni.

The translation process begins shortly afterward.

1828

The Lost Manuscript

Joseph begins translating.

Martin Harris serves as a scribe.

A manuscript of approximately 116 pages is lost.

Joseph later reports receiving divine rebuke.

Translation temporarily ceases.

This becomes one of the most difficult episodes of the translation process.

1829

Translation Resumes

Translation continues with:

Oliver Cowdery

serving as principal scribe.

Most of the Book of Mormon is completed during this period.

May 1829

Aaronic Priesthood

Joseph and Oliver report receiving authority from:

John the Baptist

They are instructed regarding baptism.

Later in 1829

Melchizedek Priesthood

Joseph and Oliver report further priesthood authority through apostolic messengers.

These experiences become foundational to Restoration priesthood claims.

1830

March 26, 1830

The Book of Mormon is published.

Its appearance marks the public beginning of the Restoration movement.

April 6, 1830

The Church is formally organized in:

Fayette

Founding members include:

- Joseph Smith
- Oliver Cowdery
- Hyrum Smith
- Samuel Smith
- David Whitmer
- Peter Whitmer Jr.

The Restoration Church officially begins.

1831

Move to Ohio

Church headquarters shift to:

Kirtland

Joseph begins receiving numerous revelations later included in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Mission to the Lamanites

Early missionaries travel westward.

This effort helps introduce the Restoration message to broader regions.

1832

First Written First Vision Account

Joseph records an account of the First Vision.

This becomes the earliest surviving written version.

1833

Zion and Missouri Conflict

Tensions increase in:

Jackson County

Church members face growing hostility.

Violence erupts.

Many Saints are expelled.

These events deeply influence Restoration concepts of Zion.

1834

Zion's Camp

Joseph leads an expedition to assist displaced Saints in Missouri.

Although military objectives are not achieved, the experience helps train future church leaders.

Many future apostles participate.

1835

Doctrine and Covenants Published

The first Doctrine and Covenants is published.

It includes the famous marriage statement affirming monogamy.

This statement later becomes central to RLDS arguments concerning polygamy.

1836

Kirtland Temple Dedicated

The:

Kirtland Temple

is dedicated.

Reports of spiritual manifestations follow.

This remains one of the most significant events in early Restoration history.

1837

Financial Difficulties

The Kirtland Safety Society collapses.

Economic problems contribute to dissent.

Critics later cite this episode as evidence against Joseph Smith.

Supporters point to the broader financial panic affecting many institutions.

1838

Missouri War

Conflict escalates dramatically.

Governor:

Lilburn Boggs

issues the infamous Extermination Order.

Saints are driven from Missouri.

Liberty Jail

Joseph is imprisoned in:

Liberty Jail

Several important revelations emerge during this period.

The experience becomes central to Restoration memory.

1839

Release and Relocation

Joseph is released from custody.

The Saints gather in Illinois.

A new settlement begins.

Founding of Nauvoo

The city of:

Nauvoo

is established.

It rapidly becomes a major center of Restoration life.

1840–1843

Growth of Nauvoo

Membership expands.

Missionary efforts spread internationally.

Thousands gather to Nauvoo.

Joseph serves in multiple leadership capacities.

The city becomes one of the largest communities in Illinois.

Theological Development

Joseph delivers important sermons.

New teachings emerge concerning:

- Resurrection
- Eternal life
- Temple worship
- Salvation
- Human destiny

Many later controversies originate in this period.

1844

Presidential Campaign

Joseph Smith announces his candidacy for President of the United States.

His platform includes:

- Religious liberty
- Prison reform
- Expansion of rights
- Gradual compensated emancipation

The campaign attracts national attention.

King Follett Discourse

Joseph delivers what becomes known as the King Follett Discourse.

The sermon addresses:

- The nature of God
- Human destiny
- Eternal life
- Divine-human relationship

It becomes one of the most discussed sermons in Restoration history.

June 1844

Nauvoo Crisis

Tensions intensify surrounding the publication of the *Nauvoo Expositor*.

Political and legal conflicts escalate.

Joseph and Hyrum submit to arrest.

June 27, 1844

Martyrdom

While confined in:

Carthage Jail

Joseph Smith and:

Hyrum Smith

are attacked by an armed mob.

Both are killed.

Joseph is thirty-eight years old.

His death creates the succession crisis that will permanently shape Restoration history.

Summary of Joseph Smith's Life

From 1805 to 1844, Joseph Smith:

- Produced the Book of Mormon.
- Organized the Restoration Church.
- Introduced continuing revelation.
- Established Kirtland and Nauvoo.
- Endured imprisonment and persecution.
- Inspired missionary movements.
- Became one of the most influential religious figures in American history.
- Died as a martyr according to believers and followers.

Whether viewed as prophet, reformer, visionary, or religious founder, his influence continues to shape millions of lives and numerous Restoration traditions.

Appendix B

Timeline of the Reorganized Church

1844–Present

> *"The church is greater than any one man, but it is not greater than the truth."* — attributed to the spirit of the Reorganized tradition

The history of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), known today as the Community of Christ, represents one of the most important yet often overlooked chapters in Restoration history.

While much public attention has focused upon the Utah-based church led by Brigham Young, the Reorganized tradition preserved an alternative interpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings, succession, and legacy.

This timeline traces the development of that tradition from the martyrdom of Joseph Smith to the modern era.

1844

June 27, 1844

Joseph Smith and:

Hyrum Smith

are killed at:

Carthage Jail

The Restoration immediately enters a succession crisis.

No universally accepted successor exists.

August 1844

Several leadership claims emerge.

Among the major claimants:

- Sidney Rigdon
- Brigham Young
- James Strang

The Restoration begins fragmenting into multiple movements.

1845–1850

The Smith Family Remains Behind

Unlike many Saints who migrate westward, the family of Joseph Smith remains in Illinois.

Key figures include:

- Emma Hale Smith
- Joseph Smith III

Emma continues rejecting claims that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

This position becomes foundational for the future Reorganization.

1851–1859

Growing Calls for Reorganization

Scattered Restoration believers begin advocating reunification.

Many reject:

- Polygamy
- Utah leadership claims
- Various splinter movements

Increasing attention focuses on Joseph Smith III as a possible future leader.

1860

April 6, 1860

Formal Reorganization

At Amboy, Illinois:

Joseph Smith III

accepts leadership of the Reorganized Church.

This date is generally regarded as the formal beginning of the RLDS Church.

The Reorganization declares itself the lawful continuation of the church founded in 1830.

1860s

Early RLDS Growth

Missionary work expands.

Congregations organize throughout:

- Illinois
- Iowa
- Wisconsin
- Michigan
- Canada

The church develops a distinct identity separate from Utah Mormonism.

Defense of Joseph Smith

The RLDS Church begins publishing extensive materials defending Joseph Smith against:

- Polygamy accusations
- Succession claims of Utah leaders
- Charges of doctrinal innovation

These efforts become a defining feature of RLDS history.

1870s

Missionary Expansion

The church grows steadily.

Missionaries travel throughout North America and Europe.

The Reorganization emerges as the largest non-Utah Restoration body.

Historical Investigations

Joseph Smith III begins extensive inquiries regarding plural marriage.

Witnesses are interviewed.

Documents are collected.

The RLDS historical case against Joseph Smith's involvement in polygamy becomes increasingly developed.

1880s

Consolidation

Church structures become more organized.

Publishing efforts increase.

The RLDS Church develops stronger institutional foundations.

Temple Lot Litigation Begins

Disputes arise concerning ownership of the original Temple Lot in:

Independence

The litigation becomes one of the most important legal battles in Restoration history.

1890

LDS Manifesto

Wilford Woodruff

issues the Manifesto ending official authorization of new plural marriages.

RLDS leaders regard this development as indirect support for their anti-polygamy position.

1894

Temple Lot Case Decision

Federal courts issue rulings regarding ownership of the Temple Lot.

Although legal outcomes prove complex, the case generates an enormous historical record that remains important to scholars today.

1900–1914

Continued Expansion

The Reorganization experiences steady growth.

New congregations are established.

Educational programs expand.

Missionary activity increases.

The church becomes increasingly international.

Leadership of Joseph Smith III

Joseph Smith III continues serving as president.

His lengthy tenure provides remarkable stability.

1914

Death of Joseph Smith III

After more than fifty years of leadership:

Joseph Smith III

dies.

His presidency remains one of the longest in Restoration history.

Many regard him as the principal architect of RLDS identity.

1915–1945

Institutional Growth

Successive presidents continue expanding the church.

Educational and missionary efforts increase.

The church develops stronger international connections.

Zion Reinterpreted

The concept of Zion gradually expands.

Rather than focusing solely on physical gathering, increasing emphasis is placed upon:

- Community
- Justice
- Peace
- Christian discipleship

This development becomes increasingly important in RLDS theology.

1946–1960

Global Mission

The church experiences significant international growth.

Missionary efforts extend into:

- Latin America
- Africa
- Asia
- Pacific regions

The Restoration message reaches new cultures and nations.

1960

Centennial of Reorganization

The RLDS Church celebrates one hundred years since the formal reorganization.

Historical reflection increases.

Renewed attention is given to:

- Joseph Smith
- Joseph Smith III
- Restoration heritage

1966

RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Section 144

Under the presidency of:

W. Wallace Smith

Section 144 is added to the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants.

For many traditional RLDS Restorationists, this section effectively marks the close of the classic RLDS era.

It becomes an important reference point for later theological discussions.

1970s

Social and Theological Change

The church begins experiencing significant theological development.

Discussions increase concerning:

- Ecumenism
- Peace ministries
- Social justice
- Broader Christian engagement

Some members welcome these developments.

Others express concern regarding continuity with historic RLDS teachings.

1984

Section 156

A major revelation is presented to the church.

Among its most significant provisions:

- Authorization of women's ordination
- Construction of a temple in Independence

The decision proves controversial.

Some members leave to form Restoration Branch movements.

This becomes one of the most significant turning points in modern RLDS history.

1994

Independence Temple Dedicated

The:

Independence Temple

is dedicated.

Unlike earlier Restoration temples, its primary emphasis involves:

- Peace
- Reconciliation
- Worship

The temple becomes a major symbol of the church's evolving identity.

2001

Name Change

The RLDS Church officially adopts the name:

Community of Christ

Leaders explain that the new name better reflects the church's Christ-centered mission.

The change generates mixed reactions.

Some welcome it.

Others fear loss of historical identity.

2000s

Continued Transformation

Community of Christ increasingly emphasizes:

- Peace and justice
- Christian discipleship
- Ecumenical engagement
- Sacred worth of all persons

At the same time, debates continue regarding the relationship between modern developments and historic RLDS theology.

Restoration Branch Movement

Throughout this period, many traditional RLDS members organize independent Restoration Branches.

These groups generally seek to preserve:

- Historic RLDS doctrine

- RLDS Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144
- Traditional Restoration teachings
- Opposition to later theological innovations

The movement becomes an important component of modern Restorationism.

2010–Present

Global Community

Community of Christ becomes an international church.

Congregations exist across multiple continents.

The church continues emphasizing:

- Peace
- Justice
- Reconciliation
- Christ-centered mission

Historic RLDS Revival

Interest in historic RLDS theology increases among:

- Independent Restorationists
- Scholars
- Former Latter Day Saints
- Christian universalists
- Alternative Restoration movements

Many revisit:

- Joseph Smith III
- Early RLDS apologetics
- Anti-polygamy scholarship
- Restoration theology through Section 144

Major RLDS Presidents

1860–1914

Joseph Smith III

1915–1946

Frederick M. Smith

1946–1958

Israel A. Smith

1958–1978

W. Wallace Smith

1978–1996

Wallace B. Smith

1996–2005

W. Grant McMurray

2005–2016

Stephen M. Veazey

2016–Present

Stephen M. Veazey and subsequent leadership transitions continue shaping the denomination.

Key Themes of RLDS History

Throughout its history, the Reorganized tradition emphasized:

- Joseph Smith's prophetic mission
- Rejection of plural marriage
- Continuing revelation
- Lineal succession
- The Book of Mormon
- Doctrine and Covenants
- Christ-centered Restorationism
- Zion
- Peace and reconciliation

Summary

From the succession crisis of 1844 to the present day, the Reorganized tradition has preserved a distinct interpretation of the Restoration.

It defended Joseph Smith against accusations it regarded as unjust.

It rejected doctrines it believed originated after his death.

It developed a unique vision of Christ-centered Restoration Christianity.

Whether expressed through historic RLDS congregations, Restoration Branches, independent Restorationists, or the modern Community of Christ, this tradition remains one of the most significant heirs of Joseph Smith's legacy.

Appendix C

Major Arguments Against Joseph Smith and Responses

A Restorationist Apologetics Handbook

Introduction

No religious founder in American history has been subjected to more sustained criticism than Joseph Smith Jr..

From his own lifetime to the present day, accusations have been leveled against his character, his revelations, his teachings, and his motives.

Some criticisms are based upon genuine historical questions.

Others arise from misunderstanding.

Still others depend upon assumptions that deserve careful reexamination.

The purpose of this appendix is not to claim that every question has been resolved.

Rather, it is to summarize the major accusations against Joseph Smith and provide concise Restorationist responses informed by the historic RLDS tradition.

Argument 1

"Joseph Smith Was a Fraud"

The Claim

Joseph Smith knowingly invented his religious experiences and deceived followers for personal gain.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Claims of visions.
- Claims of angels.
- Production of new scripture.
- Treasure-seeking activities.
- Lack of conventional academic credentials.

Restorationist Response

The fraud theory encounters several significant difficulties.

First, Joseph Smith consistently maintained his testimony despite imprisonment, persecution, poverty, and eventual death.

Second, many close associates remained loyal despite opportunities to abandon him.

Third, the complexity and influence of the Book of Mormon require explanation.

Fourth, even many skeptical historians acknowledge Joseph Smith's sincerity.

The evidence may support the conclusion that Joseph Smith was mistaken.

It provides weaker support for the conclusion that he was consciously deceptive.

Summary

The historical record supports sincerity more strongly than deliberate fraud.

Argument 2

"The Book of Mormon Is a Nineteenth-Century Invention"

The Claim

Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon from his own imagination and contemporary sources.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Similarities to nineteenth-century language.
- The King James Bible.
- Revivalist themes.
- Frontier religious culture.

Restorationist Response

The Book of Mormon's complexity, narrative structure, theological coherence, and enduring influence make simplistic explanations difficult.

The book contains extensive internal consistency and intricate literary patterns.

While debates concerning origin continue, dismissing it as a crude fabrication fails to account adequately for the text itself.

Summary

The Book of Mormon remains a remarkable document whose origin continues to invite serious investigation.

Argument 3

"Joseph Smith Practiced Polygamy"

The Claim

Joseph Smith secretly introduced and practiced plural marriage.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Later affidavits.
- Testimonies from Utah-era participants.
- Nauvoo allegations.
- Historical reconstructions.

Restorationist Response

The historic RLDS position emphasized:

- Joseph Smith's public denials.
- Emma Smith's testimony.
- The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants marriage statement.
- The late nature of much pro-polygamy evidence.
- The emergence of public polygamy under Brigham Young.

The issue remains one of the most disputed subjects in Restoration history.

The traditional RLDS argument maintains that the burden of proof has not been conclusively met.

Summary

The evidence remains contested, and the historic RLDS defense deserves serious consideration.

Argument 4

"Joseph Smith Was Racist"

The Claim

Joseph Smith promoted racial inequality and exclusion.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Certain nineteenth-century statements.
- Later Mormon racial restrictions.
- Book of Mormon passages.

Restorationist Response

Historical evidence demonstrates:

- Black converts joined the church.
- Elijah Abel received priesthood ordination.
- Joseph Smith advocated compensated emancipation.
- No comprehensive racial priesthood ban existed during his lifetime.

Later racial restrictions emerged under different leadership.

Summary

Joseph Smith reflected some assumptions of his era but appears significantly more inclusive than later critics often acknowledge.

Argument 5

"The Book of Mormon Is Racist"

The Claim

The Book of Mormon teaches racial superiority based on skin color.

Evidence Usually Cited

- References to curses.
- References to skin color.
- Nephite-Lamanite divisions.

Restorationist Response

The book repeatedly teaches:

- God invites all people to come unto Him.
- Righteousness matters more than ancestry.
- Lamanites frequently become more righteous than Nephites.
- Salvation is universally available.

Many scholars argue that covenant identity rather than race is the primary concern of the text.

Summary

The Book of Mormon contains difficult passages but its overall message is universal and Christ-centered.

Argument 6

"The Book of Abraham Disproves Joseph Smith"

The Claim

Modern Egyptology demonstrates that Joseph Smith translated Egyptian incorrectly.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Surviving papyri.
- Egyptological translations.
- Facsimile controversies.

Restorationist Response

Several possible explanations remain:

- Missing papyri theory.
- Catalyst theory.
- Broader revelatory understandings of translation.
- Symbolic interpretations.

The issue remains important but is not necessarily decisive regarding Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

Summary

The controversy raises questions but does not automatically disprove Joseph Smith.

Argument 7

"The King Follett Discourse Is Heretical"

The Claim

Joseph Smith abandoned Christianity in his later teachings.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Teachings about God.
- Human exaltation.
- Eternal progression.

Restorationist Response

Many themes in the discourse resemble ancient Christian teachings concerning:

- Theosis.
- Glorification.
- Participation in divine life.
- Union with God.

The sermon can be interpreted within broader Christian tradition rather than outside it.

Summary

The King Follett Discourse is controversial but not necessarily incompatible with historic Christianity.

Argument 8

"Joseph Smith Was a Dictator"

The Claim

Joseph Smith exercised authoritarian control over followers.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Nauvoo leadership.
- Political involvement.
- Religious authority.

Restorationist Response

Membership remained voluntary.

Councils functioned regularly.

Public sustaining votes occurred.

Dissenters frequently left and openly criticized Joseph Smith.

Authority existed, but evidence for totalitarian control remains limited.

Summary

Joseph Smith was influential, but influence is not the same thing as dictatorship.

Argument 9

"Joseph Smith Invented New Doctrine"

The Claim

Joseph Smith introduced beliefs unknown to Christianity.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Continuing revelation.
- Additional scripture.
- Theosis-like teachings.
- Expanded cosmology.

Restorationist Response

Christian history includes numerous periods of doctrinal development.

Many Restoration teachings possess parallels in:

- Early Christianity.
- Eastern Christianity.
- Christian mysticism.
- Apocalyptic traditions.

Novelty alone does not determine truth or falsehood.

Summary

Many Restoration doctrines have deeper historical roots than critics often assume.

Argument 10

"Joseph Smith Failed as a Prophet"

The Claim

Prophecies attributed to Joseph Smith did not occur.

Evidence Usually Cited

- Specific prediction controversies.
- Expectations concerning Zion.
- Interpretive disputes.

Restorationist Response

Many alleged failures depend upon selective readings.

Others involve symbolic language or conditional prophecy.

Still others remain matters of interpretation.

Each claim should be examined individually rather than assumed collectively.

Summary

The prophetic record is more complex than simple success-or-failure narratives suggest.

Argument 11

"Brigham Young Proves Joseph Smith Taught Polygamy"

The Claim

Because Brigham Young taught plural marriage, Joseph Smith must have taught it first.

Restorationist Response

This argument assumes continuity rather than demonstrating it.

The historic RLDS position questioned precisely that assumption.

The existence of a later practice does not by itself establish its earlier origin.

Independent evidence remains necessary.

Summary

Later Utah practice does not automatically prove Joseph Smith's involvement.

Argument 12

"The Restoration Fragmented, Therefore It Was False"

The Claim

Multiple Restoration denominations demonstrate failure.

Restorationist Response

Christian history itself contains numerous denominations.

Religious fragmentation does not necessarily invalidate foundational claims.

The succession crisis demonstrates ambiguity, not necessarily falsehood.

Summary

Division may reveal human limitations without disproving the Restoration.

Argument 13

"Joseph Smith Was Just a Product of His Time"

The Claim

Everything Joseph Smith taught can be explained through nineteenth-century influences.

Restorationist Response

All historical figures exist within cultural contexts.

The relevant question is whether Joseph Smith merely repeated contemporary ideas or transformed them.

Many Restoration concepts differ significantly from surrounding religious culture.

Summary

Context explains some things but not everything.

Final Assessment

After nearly two centuries of debate, Joseph Smith remains a figure who resists simplistic explanation.

The evidence does not support the caricature of a transparent fraud.

Neither does it eliminate every historical question.

Instead, the historical Joseph Smith emerges as:

- A visionary.
- A reformer.
- A religious innovator.
- A sincere believer in revelation.
- A profoundly influential figure.

Whether one ultimately accepts him as a prophet remains a matter of faith.

Yet fair historical inquiry increasingly suggests that many of the most common accusations are weaker than their popular presentation implies.

Appendix D

Joseph Smith and the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants

Continuing Revelation Through Section 144

Introduction

Among the unique contributions of the Restoration, few are more significant than the doctrine of continuing revelation.

Most Christian traditions possess a closed canon. Revelation is believed to have occurred in the past and been preserved in scripture.

The Restoration introduced a different possibility.

God had spoken in the past.

God was speaking in the present.

God would continue speaking in the future.

This conviction became one of the defining principles of the movement founded by Joseph Smith Jr..

The RLDS tradition preserved this principle while developing it in distinctive ways. Through successive presidents, new revelations were added to the Doctrine and Covenants, eventually extending through Section 144 and beyond.

For many historic Restorationists, the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144 represents the fullest expression of classic Reorganized theology.

This appendix surveys the major themes of that revelatory tradition.

Part I

Joseph Smith and the Foundation of Continuing Revelation

The Revolutionary Idea

Joseph Smith's earliest revelations challenged one of the central assumptions of nineteenth-century Protestantism.

The heavens were not closed.

God had not ceased speaking.

Prophecy had not disappeared.

The same God who spoke to Moses, Isaiah, Peter, and John could still reveal divine will.

This conviction stands behind every section of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Without continuing revelation, the Restoration loses its distinctive character.

With continuing revelation, the Restoration becomes an ongoing movement rather than a completed event.

Revelation and Scripture

Joseph Smith did not view scripture as an alternative to revelation.

Rather, scripture was the preserved record of revelation.

The Bible itself existed because God had spoken.

Consequently, new revelation did not compete with scripture.

It extended the same divine relationship that produced scripture in the first place.

This understanding became foundational for the Reorganized tradition.

The Early Revelations

The earliest sections of the Doctrine and Covenants emphasize:

- Repentance
- Faith
- Baptism
- Spiritual gifts
- Missionary work
- The gathering of Israel

These themes established the basic framework of Restoration theology.

Importantly, the focus remained overwhelmingly Christ-centered.

The purpose of revelation was not novelty.

The purpose was discipleship.

Part II

Zion and the Kingdom of God

One of Joseph Smith's Central Themes

Few concepts appear more frequently in the Doctrine and Covenants than Zion.

For Joseph Smith, Zion represented more than geography.

It represented covenant community.

A people transformed by God.

A society reflecting divine principles.

A foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

Early Gathering

The early revelations emphasized gathering believers into communities of faith.

This gathering possessed both practical and spiritual dimensions.

Believers sought:

- Unity
- Mutual support

- Consecration
- Worship

The gathering reflected the conviction that faith should shape communal life rather than remain merely private.

Missouri and the Testing of Zion

The Missouri persecutions profoundly shaped Restoration thought.

The failure to establish Zion immediately did not destroy the vision.

Instead, it deepened it.

Zion became both a present responsibility and a future hope.

This interpretation would later influence RLDS theology significantly.

RLDS Development

The Reorganized tradition gradually emphasized Zion as:

- Community
- Peace

- Justice
- Reconciliation
- Christ-centered living

Rather than abandoning Joseph Smith's vision, RLDS thinkers sought to expand its meaning.

The Kingdom of God became less about physical concentration and more about transformed relationships.

Part III

Priesthood and Ministry

Service Rather Than Privilege

The Doctrine and Covenants consistently presents priesthood as service.

Authority exists for ministry.

Leadership exists for stewardship.

Office exists for responsibility.

This principle remained central to historic RLDS understanding.

The Purpose of Priesthood

According to the revelations, priesthood exists to:

- Preach the gospel
- Care for the church
- Administer ordinances
- Strengthen discipleship
- Build Zion

The emphasis falls upon service rather than status.

Accountability

One of the strengths of the RLDS tradition was its emphasis upon accountability.

Prophetic leadership existed.

Yet councils, conferences, and common consent also remained important.

Authority and responsibility were intended to function together.

Part IV

The Mission of the Church

Why the Church Exists

The Doctrine and Covenants repeatedly returns to mission.

The church does not exist merely for self-preservation.

It exists to participate in God's work.

This mission includes:

- Evangelism
- Compassion
- Reconciliation
- Teaching
- Spiritual formation

Christ at the Center

Throughout the revelations, Jesus Christ remains central.

The church exists because of Christ.

The gospel concerns Christ.

Salvation comes through Christ.

This emphasis became increasingly important within RLDS theology.

The Universal Scope of Mission

The Restoration message was never intended for a single nation or ethnicity.

The revelations repeatedly envision a global mission.

All peoples are invited.

All nations are included.

This universal perspective later informed RLDS commitments to racial inclusion and international outreach.

Part V

Stewardship and Consecration

Sacred Responsibility

Another recurring theme involves stewardship.

Everything belongs ultimately to God.

Human beings are caretakers rather than owners.

This principle applies to:

- Property
- Resources
- Talents
- Time
- Communities

Consecration

The law of consecration remains one of the most ambitious ideals in Restoration theology.

Its purpose was not forced equality.

Its purpose was covenant responsibility.

The vision involved a society where economic life reflected spiritual values.

Although rarely implemented fully, the ideal remained influential.

RLDS Interpretation

The Reorganized tradition often emphasized stewardship over rigid economic systems.

The deeper principle involved generosity, responsibility, and care for others.

This interpretation allowed consecration to remain relevant in changing circumstances.

Part VI

Peace and Reconciliation

An Increasing Emphasis

As the RLDS tradition matured, themes of peace and reconciliation became increasingly prominent.

Many leaders saw these themes as natural extensions of Zion.

A truly Zion-like community would be:

- Peaceful
- Just
- Compassionate

- Reconciled

The Ministry of Reconciliation

The church's mission increasingly emphasized healing divisions.

Between individuals.

Between communities.

Between nations.

This emphasis eventually became one of the defining features of modern Community of Christ.

Roots in Earlier Revelation

Although later developments expanded these themes, their roots can be found in earlier Restoration principles.

The Kingdom of God always involved transformed relationships.

Peace therefore represented continuity rather than innovation.

Part VII

Section 144 and the End of the Classic RLDS Era

Historical Significance

For many traditional Restorationists, RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Section 144 represents the culmination of the classic Reorganized period.

Added under the leadership of:

W. Wallace Smith

the section reflects mature RLDS theology while maintaining continuity with earlier principles.

Why Section 144 Matters

Many Restoration Branch believers and independent Restorationists regard Section 144 as an important reference point because:

- It precedes later controversies.
- It reflects historic RLDS identity.
- It preserves classic Restoration themes.

- It maintains continuity with earlier doctrine.

Consequently, Section 144 often functions symbolically as well as doctrinally.

A Living Tradition

Even for those who accept later revelations, Section 144 marks a significant milestone.

It represents the end of one era and the beginning of another.

Understanding it helps illuminate the evolution of the Reorganized tradition.

Major Themes of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144

The following themes appear repeatedly:

Continuing Revelation

God still speaks.

Jesus Christ

Christ remains central.

Zion

The Kingdom of God must be built in community.

Mission

The church exists to serve.

Stewardship

Resources are sacred trusts.

Priesthood

Authority exists for ministry.

Reconciliation

The gospel heals divisions.

Hope

History moves toward divine fulfillment.

The RLDS Contribution to Restoration Theology

The Reorganized Church preserved several important insights:

- Revelation without abandoning accountability.
- Restoration without isolation from Christianity.
- Zion without coercion.
- Priesthood without domination.
- Mission without triumphalism.

These contributions remain valuable regardless of denominational affiliation.

Conclusion

The RLDS Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144 represents one of the richest streams of Restoration thought.

It preserves Joseph Smith's conviction that revelation continues.

It expands the vision of Zion.

It emphasizes Christ-centered discipleship.

It calls believers to stewardship, peace, and mission.

Most importantly, it reminds us that the Restoration is not merely a historical event.

It is an ongoing relationship between God and God's people.

The heavens remain open.

The invitation remains active.

The work of restoration continues.

Appendix E

One Hundred Quotations of Joseph Smith

Organized by Theme

Introduction

Few figures in Restoration history have left behind as many memorable statements as Joseph Smith Jr.. Some survive in sermons, some in letters, some in journals, and some through the recollections of listeners.

Because wording occasionally varies between sources, the quotations below are presented in commonly accepted forms. They are intended to illustrate the major themes of Joseph Smith's teachings rather than serve as critical editions.

Section I

Revelation

1

"I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."

2

"God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them."

3

"The great thing in this world is to know how to direct all things to the glory of God."

4

"A man can do nothing for himself unless God direct him in the right way."

5

"No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations."

6

"It is the privilege of the children of God to come to God and get revelation."

7

"The Holy Ghost is a revelator."

8

"We believe all that God has revealed."

9

"We believe all that He does now reveal."

10

"We believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."

Section II

Jesus Christ

11

"The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ."

12

"We know that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day."

13

"Jesus Christ is the Great Head of the church."

14

"Salvation cannot come without Jesus Christ."

15

"Christ is the mediator between God and man."

16

"Our religion would be vain without Christ."

17

"All things point to Christ."

18

"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

19

"We preach Christ crucified."

20

"Jesus Christ is the only name given whereby man can be saved."

Section III

Faith

21

"Faith comes by hearing the word of God."

22

"Faith is the first principle in revealed religion."

23

"Faith is the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen."

24

"Without faith there can be no salvation."

25

"Faith and doubt cannot exist in the same mind at the same time."

26

"Faith is the moving cause of all action."

27

"Every blessing comes through faith."

28

"The Lord requires the heart."

29

"God rewards those who diligently seek Him."

30

"Faith grows through obedience."

Section IV

Charity and Love

31

"Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism."

32

"Love is one of the chief characteristics of Deity."

33

"If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another."

34

"It is a time-honored adage that love begets love."

35

"We should cultivate kindness."

36

"The nearer we get to our Heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion."

37

"A man filled with the love of God is not content with blessing his family alone."

38

"Let us live so that when we die even the undertaker will be sorry."

39

"Charity covers a multitude of sins."

40

"Love one another and forgive one another."

Section V

Truth

41

"The truth is the Mormonism."

42

"Truth is knowledge of things as they are."

43

"One of the grand fundamental principles is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may."

44

"We should gather all the good and true principles in the world."

45

"Knowledge saves a man."

46

"A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge."

47

"I never hear of a man being damned for believing too much."

48

"The glory of God is intelligence."

49

"Knowledge does away with darkness."

50

"Truth will prevail."

Section VI

Zion

51

"Zion is the pure in heart."

52

"The building up of Zion is a cause that has interested the people of God in every age."

53

"We ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object."

54

"Let us seek to establish Zion."

55

"Peace shall dwell in Zion."

56

"Zion cannot be built except by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom."

57

"The Lord calls for a holy people."

58

"Unity is strength."

59

"Where there is love, there is Zion."

60

"The Kingdom of God must fill the earth."

Section VII

Human Destiny

61

"It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God."

62

"If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."

63

"Happiness is the object and design of our existence."

64

"Man is the offspring of God."

65

"The mind of man is immortal."

66

"All spirits are eternal."

67

"Intelligence is eternal."

68

"The soul is capable of enlargement."

69

"Knowledge and intelligence grow forever."

70

"Man was not created for destruction."

Section VIII

Priesthood and Service

71

"No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood alone."

72

"Only by persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned."

73

"Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly."

74

"The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with righteousness."

75

"When we undertake to cover our sins, the heavens withdraw themselves."

76

"The powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon principles of righteousness."

77

"Leadership is service."

78

"The Lord requires integrity."

79

"The greatest among you shall be your servant."

80

"Priesthood exists for blessing others."

Section IX

Freedom

81

"We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience."

82

"Let them worship how, where, or what they may."

83

"Friendship and freedom belong together."

84

"The Constitution is a glorious standard."

85

"Liberty is a gift from God."

86

"Religious coercion is contrary to the gospel."

87

"Truth fears no investigation."

88

"Every man should be free."

89

"Conscience is sacred."

90

"The rights of mankind should be respected."

Section X

The Restoration

91

"The Standard of Truth has been erected."

92

"No unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing."

93

"Persecutions may rage."

94

"Mobs may combine."

95

"Armies may assemble."

96

"Calumny may defame."

97

"But the truth of God will go forth boldly."

98

"Nobly."

99

"Independently."

100

"Till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear."

Conclusion

These one hundred quotations reveal the themes that consistently occupied Joseph Smith's mind and ministry:

- Jesus Christ
- Revelation
- Faith
- Truth
- Zion
- Human destiny
- Charity
- Priesthood as service
- Religious freedom
- The continuing progress of God's Kingdom

Whether one views Joseph Smith as prophet, reformer, visionary, or religious founder, these statements help explain why his influence has endured long after his death.

Appendix F

Frequently Asked Questions

Questions and Answers from a Restorationist Perspective

Introduction

The Restoration movement has generated questions from believers, critics, scholars, and seekers since its beginning. Some questions concern history. Others concern doctrine. Still others concern controversies that have divided Restoration traditions for generations.

The answers provided here reflect a historic Restorationist perspective informed primarily by the RLDS tradition through Doctrine and Covenants Section 144.

Joseph Smith

1. Was Joseph Smith really a prophet?

Answer

Ultimately, this is a matter of faith.

Historically, Joseph Smith claimed visions, revelations, angelic visitations, and divine authority.

Millions have accepted those claims.

Others have rejected them.

What history can establish is that Joseph Smith sincerely believed his experiences were genuine and that he became one of the most influential religious figures in American history.

---

2. Was Joseph Smith a fraud?

Answer

The evidence for deliberate fraud is weaker than many critics assume.

Joseph Smith endured imprisonment, violence, poverty, persecution, and ultimately death without abandoning his testimony.

One may conclude that he was mistaken.

The historical evidence more strongly supports sincerity than conscious deception.

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3. Why is Joseph Smith so controversial?

Answer

Because he made extraordinary claims.

He claimed:

- Visions of God.
- Angelic visitations.
- New scripture.
- Continuing revelation.

Such claims naturally generate strong reactions.

Religious innovators are rarely ignored.

---

4. Why did Joseph Smith die?

Answer

Joseph Smith and his brother:

Hyrum Smith

were killed by a mob at:

Carthage Jail

on June 27, 1844.

The causes included political, religious, economic, and social tensions.

Believers regard the event as martyrdom.

The Book of Mormon

5. Is the Book of Mormon scripture?

Answer

Restoration believers answer yes.

Others disagree.

The question ultimately depends upon one's assessment of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and one's spiritual experience with the text.

---

6. Is the Book of Mormon racist?

Answer

The book contains passages that modern readers often find difficult.

However, its overall message emphasizes:

- Universal salvation.
- Equality before God.
- Christ-centered discipleship.

The historic RLDS tradition generally rejected the claim that the book teaches racial superiority.

---

7. Why does the Book of Mormon mention skin color?

Answer

Interpretations vary.

Possible explanations include:

- Symbolic language.

- Covenant identity.
- Cultural markers.
- Ancient literary conventions.

The issue remains debated.

Many Restoration scholars argue that modern racial categories should not be imposed upon the text.

---

8. Can archaeology prove the Book of Mormon?

Answer

No.

Neither supporters nor critics possess definitive archaeological proof.

The question remains open and continues to be discussed by scholars.

Polygamy

9. Did Joseph Smith practice polygamy?

Answer

This remains one of the most disputed issues in Restoration history.

The Utah tradition generally answers yes.

The historic RLDS tradition answered no.

The RLDS position relied heavily upon:

- Emma Smith's testimony.
- Joseph Smith's denials.
- The 1835 marriage statement.
- Questions regarding later evidence.

The debate continues.

---

10. Why did Emma Smith reject polygamy?

Answer

According to her own testimony, she denied that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

Her statements became central to the RLDS defense of Joseph Smith.

Critics argue she was mistaken.

The RLDS tradition generally regarded her testimony as credible.

---

11. Why didn't Emma go west with Brigham Young?

Answer

Emma rejected Brigham Young's leadership claims.

She remained in Illinois with her family.

This decision later influenced the formation of the Reorganized Church.

Succession

12. Why didn't everyone follow Brigham Young?

Answer

Because succession was disputed.

Several competing claims emerged after Joseph Smith's death.

Major claimants included:

- Sidney Rigdon
- Brigham Young
- James Strang

The existence of multiple claimants demonstrates that succession was not universally settled.

---

13. Why did Joseph Smith III reject Brigham Young?

Answer

Joseph Smith III believed:

- His father opposed polygamy.
- Brigham Young introduced innovations.

- The Reorganized Church represented continuity with the original Restoration.

These convictions shaped RLDS identity.

Doctrine and Revelation

14. What is continuing revelation?

Answer

The belief that God still speaks.

The Restoration teaches that divine revelation did not cease with biblical times.

This principle remains one of the movement's defining characteristics.

---

15. Why does the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants have more sections?

Answer

Because the Reorganized Church continued adding revelations through successive presidents.

This reflects its commitment to continuing revelation.

---

16. Does continuing revelation replace the Bible?

Answer

No.

The Restoration traditionally views revelation as complementary to scripture rather than competitive with it.

Book of Abraham

17. What is the Book of Abraham?

Answer

A text produced by Joseph Smith in the 1830s and associated with Egyptian papyri acquired in Kirtland.

---

18. Did Joseph Smith translate Egyptian correctly?

Answer

Modern Egyptologists generally disagree with traditional assumptions regarding the surviving papyri.

Several explanations have been proposed:

- Missing papyri theory.
- Catalyst theory.
- Revelatory translation models.

The issue remains debated.

---

19. What was the RLDS position on the Book of Abraham?

Answer

Historically cautious.

The Reorganized Church did not treat it with the same authority as the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants.

Many RLDS leaders remained open to inspiration while avoiding dogmatic conclusions.

King Follett Discourse

20. What is the King Follett Discourse?

Answer

A sermon delivered by Joseph Smith in April 1844 concerning:

- The nature of God.
- Human destiny.
- Eternal life.

It is one of his most discussed theological teachings.

---

21. Is the King Follett Discourse Christian?

Answer

Many critics say no.

Many Restorationists say yes.

Several themes resemble ancient Christian doctrines of:

- Theosis.
- Glorification.
- Participation in divine life.

Interpretation remains important.

---

22. What was the RLDS view of the King Follett Discourse?

Answer

Generally cautious.

Many RLDS thinkers appreciated its spiritual insights while hesitating to build doctrine upon a text reconstructed from listener notes.

Race

23. Was Joseph Smith racist?

Answer

Like most nineteenth-century Americans, Joseph Smith reflected some assumptions of his era.

However:

- Black converts joined the church.
- Elijah Abel received priesthood authority.
- Joseph Smith supported compensated emancipation.

The historical record is more inclusive than many critics suggest.

---

24. Did Joseph Smith ban Black people from the priesthood?

Answer

No evidence demonstrates a general priesthood ban during his lifetime.

The historic RLDS tradition argued that later restrictions originated after Joseph Smith's death.

---

25. Who was Elijah Abel?

Answer

A Black Latter Day Saint ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

His ordination remains one of the strongest pieces of evidence against claims that Joseph Smith imposed racial priesthood restrictions.

RLDS and Community of Christ

26. What is the RLDS Church?

Answer

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

It formally organized in 1860 under:

Joseph Smith III

---

27. Is Community of Christ the same organization?

Answer

Yes.

The RLDS Church officially adopted the name:

Community of Christ

in 2001.

---

28. Why do some people distinguish between RLDS and Community of Christ?

Answer

Because significant theological and organizational changes occurred during the late twentieth century.

Many traditional Restorationists use "historic RLDS" to describe earlier beliefs and practices.

---

29. What are Restoration Branches?

Answer

Independent congregations that generally seek to preserve historic RLDS teachings and structures, often emphasizing RLDS Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144.

Zion

30. What is Zion?

Answer

Zion is both:

- A covenant community.
- A future hope.

Historically it referred to gathering and sacred community.

In later RLDS theology it increasingly emphasized peace, justice, and reconciliation.

---

31. Can Zion exist today?

Answer

The Restoration answer is yes.

Wherever people seek to live according to Christ's teachings, elements of Zion become present.

Final Question

32. Why does the Restoration still matter?

Answer

Because the questions that inspired it remain alive:

- Can God still speak?
- Can revelation continue?
- Can humanity be transformed?
- Can communities become more just?
- Can Christ renew the world?

The Restoration continues attracting seekers because these questions remain as relevant today as they were in Joseph Smith's time.

Conclusion

The Restoration is not merely a collection of historical controversies.

It is a living tradition centered upon:

- Jesus Christ.
- Revelation.
- Scripture.
- Zion.
- Hope.

Whether one ultimately accepts Joseph Smith's prophetic claims or not, the questions raised by the Restoration continue to challenge and inspire believers throughout the world.

Appendix G

A Restorationist Confession of Faith

A Christ-Centered Statement of Belief Rooted in Scripture, the Book of Mormon, and RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144

Preamble

We confess faith in the living God who created heaven and earth, who revealed Himself through the prophets, who was manifested perfectly in Jesus Christ, and who continues to speak through the Holy Spirit.

We affirm that the Restoration was not the creation of a new religion but a renewal of ancient Christianity through divine revelation.

We honor the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith Jr. while acknowledging that all human beings remain imperfect and subject to error.

We seek not the exaltation of any individual but the glory of God revealed through Jesus Christ.

We therefore offer this confession as a summary of historic Restorationist faith informed by the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144.

Article I

God

We believe in one eternal God.

God is the source of all existence, the ground of all being, and the creator of all things visible and invisible.

God is love.

God is truth.

God is justice.

God is mercy.

God is infinitely greater than human comprehension, yet genuinely knowable through divine self-revelation.

We reject every form of idolatry that reduces God to a tribal, national, racial, or sectarian deity.

God is the God of all humanity.

Article II

Jesus Christ

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh.

He is Savior, Redeemer, Messiah, Lord, and the perfect revelation of the Father's character.

Through His life, death, resurrection, and continuing ministry, humanity is reconciled to God.

All salvation comes through Christ.

All revelation points to Christ.

All scripture testifies of Christ.

The Restoration exists to proclaim Christ.

Article III

The Holy Spirit

We believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from God and testifies of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit inspires scripture.

The Spirit grants gifts.

The Spirit guides believers.

The Spirit continues revealing truth according to the wisdom and purposes of God.

The heavens remain open.

Article IV

Scripture

We affirm the Bible as sacred scripture and an inspired witness of God's dealings with humanity.

We affirm the Book of Mormon as another witness of Jesus Christ and a testimony of God's covenant purposes.

We affirm the Doctrine and Covenants as a record of continuing revelation given to guide the church.

We believe scripture must be interpreted through the Spirit of Christ and with humility, wisdom, and charity.

Article V

Continuing Revelation

We believe God continues to reveal divine will.

Revelation did not cease in biblical times.

God spoke in the past.

God speaks in the present.

God will continue speaking in the future.

All genuine revelation must lead toward Christ, truth, righteousness, and the building of Zion.

Article VI

The Restoration

We believe the Restoration began through the ministry of Joseph Smith.

Through that ministry, God renewed awareness of:

- Continuing revelation.
- Spiritual gifts.
- The Book of Mormon.
- The gathering of Israel.
- The building of Zion.
- The universal mission of the gospel.

The Restoration is not complete.

It remains an ongoing work.

Article VII

The Church

We believe the church is the body of Christ on earth.

Its purpose is:

- Worship.
- Discipleship.
- Fellowship.
- Service.
- Mission.

The church exists for the world rather than for itself.

Its calling is to manifest the Kingdom of God through love and service.

Article VIII

Priesthood

We believe priesthood is a sacred trust.

Its purpose is service rather than domination.

Authority exists for ministry.

Leadership exists for stewardship.

No office grants superiority before God.

The worth of every soul remains equal in the sight of God.

Article IX

Human Worth

We believe every human being possesses sacred worth.

All people are created in the image of God.

No race, nation, ethnicity, or social class is inherently superior to another.

God invites all people to come unto Him.

We reject racism, ethnic supremacy, and every ideology that denies the divine dignity of human beings.

Article X

Race and Priesthood

We affirm that the gospel is universal.

We reject racial restrictions upon participation in the life of the church.

We honor the witness of early Restoration figures such as:

Elijah Abel

whose ministry testified to the inclusive nature of the gospel.

Article XI

Marriage

We affirm monogamous marriage as the normative covenant relationship between husband and wife.

We reject the practice of plural marriage.

We affirm the historic RLDS conviction that polygamy was not part of the original gospel restored through Joseph Smith.

We uphold fidelity, mutual love, and covenant faithfulness within marriage.

Article XII

Zion

We believe Zion is the goal of Christian community.

Zion is:

- The pure in heart.
- A covenant people.
- A society shaped by justice and compassion.
- A foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

The building of Zion remains the central mission of the Restoration.

Article XIII

Stewardship

We believe all things ultimately belong to God.

Human beings are stewards rather than owners.

Resources, talents, opportunities, and communities are sacred trusts.

Faithfulness requires responsible stewardship and generosity.

Article XIV

Peace and Reconciliation

We believe followers of Christ are called to become peacemakers.

The gospel seeks reconciliation:

- Between humanity and God.
- Between individuals.
- Between communities.
- Between nations.

The work of Zion includes the work of peace.

Article XV

Salvation

We believe salvation comes through the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Human effort alone cannot save.

Salvation includes:

- Forgiveness.
- Transformation.
- Reconciliation.
- Resurrection.
- Participation in divine life.

The purpose of salvation is communion with God.

Article XVI

Theosis and Divine Participation

We believe humanity is called to grow into deeper participation in the life of God.

Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, believers are transformed into the likeness of God.

This transformation is by grace, not by human achievement.

The destiny of humanity is union with divine love.

Article XVII

The Redemption of Creation

We believe God's purposes extend beyond individual salvation.

Creation itself moves toward redemption.

History possesses meaning.

The Kingdom of God advances.

The ultimate purpose of God is restoration rather than chaos.

We therefore live in hope.

Article XVIII

Resurrection

We believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

We believe humanity shall also be raised.

Death is not the end.

The resurrection reveals God's victory over sin, suffering, and mortality.

Article XIX

Judgment

We believe God judges with perfect justice and perfect mercy.

Judgment reveals truth.

Judgment heals what can be healed.

Judgment opposes evil.

Judgment serves God's redemptive purposes.

No human being stands outside the reach of divine compassion.

Article XX

Hope for the Restoration of All Things

We believe God's love is stronger than sin.

God's mercy is deeper than human failure.

The final victory belongs to Christ.

History moves toward the reconciliation of all things in God.

We therefore live in hope rather than fear.

Article XXI

The Future

We believe the Restoration remains unfinished.

New generations are called to:

- Seek truth.
- Build Zion.

- Follow Christ.
- Welcome revelation.
- Serve humanity.

The future belongs to God.

The work continues.

Closing Declaration

We confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

We affirm the Restoration as a divine call to renewal.

We honor the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith while worshiping God alone.

We uphold scripture, revelation, Zion, peace, and discipleship.

We reject racism, coercion, and polygamy.

We seek the redemption of humanity and the reconciliation of creation.

We dedicate ourselves to the service of God and neighbor.

And we look forward to the day when:

> "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."

Amen.

Appendix H

Biographical Dictionary of Early Restoration Figures

A Reference Guide to the Men and Women Who Shaped the Restoration

Introduction

The Restoration movement was not built by one individual alone. Although Joseph Smith stands at its center, countless men and women contributed to the movement's growth, survival, conflicts, and development.

This biographical dictionary introduces many of the most important figures in early Restoration history, particularly from the perspective of the historic RLDS tradition.

A

Elijah Abel (1810–1884)

Priesthood Holder and Missionary

Elijah Abel was one of the earliest known Black members of the Restoration movement.

He was ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith's lifetime and served as a missionary.

His ordination remains historically significant because it demonstrates that Black men held priesthood office prior to the racial restrictions later implemented in Utah Mormonism.

For historic RLDS writers, Elijah Abel represented important evidence that Joseph Smith did not establish a racial priesthood ban.

B

Brigham Young (1801–1877)

Leader of the Utah Movement

Brigham Young became the principal leader of the largest group of Saints following Joseph Smith's death.

He led the migration to the Great Basin and established what became the Utah-based church.

Supporters regard him as a prophetic successor and remarkable organizer.

The historic RLDS tradition generally viewed him as the principal architect of later innovations including:

- Public polygamy
- Racial restrictions
- Certain theological developments

Despite these disagreements, Brigham Young remains one of the most influential figures in Restoration history.

C

Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850)

Principal Witness of the Book of Mormon

Oliver Cowdery served as Joseph Smith's primary scribe during much of the Book of Mormon translation.

He was one of the Three Witnesses.

Cowdery occupied prominent leadership positions during the early years of the church.

Although he later separated from Joseph Smith, he never denied his testimony concerning the Book of Mormon.

His witness remains central to Restoration claims.

D

David Whitmer (1805–1888)

Independent Witness

David Whitmer was one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon plates.

After leaving the church, he remained independent for decades.

Despite disagreements with Joseph Smith, he continued affirming his witness of the plates and angelic experiences.

His testimony is frequently cited because it survived separation from church leadership.

E

Emma Hale Smith (1804–1879)

Wife of the Prophet

Emma Hale Smith was among the most important figures in Restoration history.

She assisted Joseph Smith during the Book of Mormon translation.

She endured persecution, displacement, poverty, and personal loss.

After Joseph Smith's death, she remained in Illinois rather than following Brigham Young westward.

Emma consistently denied that Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage.

Her testimony became foundational to the historic RLDS defense of Joseph Smith.

She later supported the leadership of her son, Joseph Smith III.

H

Hyrum Smith (1800–1844)

Patriarch and Martyr

Hyrum Smith served as one of Joseph Smith's closest associates and strongest supporters.

He held major leadership positions within the church and was widely respected.

Hyrum died alongside Joseph Smith at Carthage Jail.

The Reorganized tradition frequently pointed to Hyrum's family line as evidence supporting lineal succession principles.

J

James Jesse Strang (1813–1856)

Rival Successor Claimant

James Strang emerged as one of the most significant claimants during the succession crisis.

He produced letters and revelations that he claimed supported his authority.

Strang attracted thousands of followers and established communities in Wisconsin and Michigan.

Although his movement eventually declined, it remains one of the most important non-Utah branches of the Restoration.

Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844)

Founder of the Restoration

Joseph Smith Jr. founded the movement known as the Restoration.

He reported the First Vision, translated the Book of Mormon, organized the church, introduced continuing revelation, and established communities in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois.

To believers, he was a prophet.

To critics, he remains controversial.

His influence continues across numerous Restoration traditions.

Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)

President of the Reorganized Church

Joseph Smith III became the founding president of the RLDS Church in 1860.

He spent much of his life defending his father's reputation and challenging claims concerning plural marriage.

Under his leadership, the Reorganized Church developed into the largest non-Utah Restoration body.

His presidency helped define historic RLDS identity.

L

Lucy Mack Smith (1775–1856)

Mother of the Prophet

Lucy Mack Smith played a vital role in preserving early Restoration history.

Her memoirs provide invaluable information concerning Joseph Smith's youth and the origins of the movement.

Her writings remain among the most important primary sources available to historians.

M

Martin Harris (1783–1875)

Early Supporter and Witness

Martin Harris helped finance the publication of the Book of Mormon.

He served as one of the Three Witnesses.

Although he experienced periods of estrangement from church leadership, he never denied his testimony concerning the plates.

His witness remains a central part of Restoration apologetics.

O

Orson Pratt (1811–1881)

Apostle and Theologian

Orson Pratt became one of the most influential intellectual figures in the Utah church.

He wrote extensively on theology, missionary work, and scripture.

His writings helped shape later Mormon thought.

Historic RLDS writers often disagreed with many of his theological conclusions.

P

Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857)

Missionary and Author

Parley P. Pratt was among the movement's most gifted missionaries and writers.

His books and pamphlets played a major role in spreading the Restoration internationally.

Many historians regard him as one of early Mormonism's most effective communicators.

R

Sidney Rigdon (1793–1876)

Counselor and Successor Claimant

Sidney Rigdon was a prominent Campbellite minister before joining the Restoration.

He became Joseph Smith's counselor and played an important role in early church development.

Following Joseph Smith's death, Rigdon claimed authority to lead the church.

Although unsuccessful, his movement represents one of the earliest succession alternatives.

W

Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898)

Fourth President of the Utah Church

Wilford Woodruff issued the 1890 Manifesto ending official authorization of new plural marriages.

This decision marked a turning point in Utah Mormon history and remains significant in discussions of polygamy.

Y

Young, Brigham (See Brigham Young)

See entry under Brigham Young.

Key Women of the Restoration

The Restoration was shaped not only by male leaders but also by women whose contributions are sometimes overlooked.

Among the most important were:

Emma Hale Smith

- Wife of Joseph Smith.
- Early scribe.
- Defender of the Prophet's reputation.

Lucy Mack Smith

- Preserver of family history.
- Early chronicler of Restoration origins.

Mary Bailey Smith

- Member of the Smith family.
- Participant in early church life.

Various early female converts

- Supported missionary work.
- Sustained congregations.
- Preserved family and community networks.

Their contributions remain indispensable to understanding Restoration history.

Conclusion

The Restoration emerged through a diverse collection of personalities:

- Prophets.
- Witnesses.
- Missionaries.
- Mothers.
- Critics.
- Reformers.
- Successors.

Some agreed.

Some disagreed.

Some remained loyal.

Some departed.

Yet together they shaped one of the most remarkable religious movements in American history.

Understanding their lives helps illuminate both the achievements and the controversies of the Restoration.

Appendix I

Documentary Evidence Collection

Key Historical Documents in Defense of Joseph Smith and Historic Restorationism

Introduction

One of the recurring weaknesses in discussions about Joseph Smith is the tendency to rely upon secondary summaries rather than primary evidence.

The purpose of this appendix is not to reproduce entire documents but to identify some of the most important historical sources frequently cited by defenders of Joseph Smith from within the historic RLDS tradition.

These documents have played a major role in debates concerning:

- Polygamy
- Succession

- Race
- Priesthood
- The Book of Mormon
- The Restoration
- Joseph Smith's character

Readers are encouraged to consult full editions whenever possible.

Document 1

The Articles and Covenants of the Church (1830)

Importance

This foundational document established the structure and mission of the early church.

It outlined:

- Faith in Christ
- Baptism
- Priesthood offices
- Church governance
- Discipleship

Restorationist Significance

Historic RLDS writers frequently emphasized that the earliest church documents reflected a simple, Christ-centered faith.

They argued that later innovations should be measured against these foundational principles.

Document 2

The Book of Mormon (1830)

Importance

The foundational scripture of the Restoration.

Key Themes

- Jesus Christ
- Repentance
- Covenant
- Resurrection
- Salvation
- Zion

Restorationist Significance

The Book of Mormon remains the strongest single piece of evidence cited by believers regarding Joseph Smith's prophetic mission.

RLDS writers often argued that its theological focus differs significantly from later controversies attributed to Joseph Smith.

Document 3

Doctrine and Covenants Section 20

Importance

One of the earliest revelations concerning church organization.

Key Themes

- Priesthood
- Ordinances
- Faith
- Repentance
- Church governance

Restorationist Significance

Frequently cited as evidence that the Restoration began with a relatively straightforward Christian framework.

Document 4

Doctrine and Covenants Marriage Statement (1835 Edition)

Importance

Perhaps the most important document in historic RLDS anti-polygamy apologetics.

The statement declared:

> "We believe that one man should have one wife; and one woman but one husband."

Restorationist Significance

RLDS defenders repeatedly pointed to this declaration as evidence that the church officially taught monogamy during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

The statement became central to arguments that plural marriage emerged later.

Document 5

Joseph Smith's Public Denials of Polygamy

Importance

Throughout the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith publicly denied accusations that he taught plural marriage.

Restorationist Significance

Historic RLDS writers argued that these denials should be taken seriously unless overwhelming evidence demonstrated otherwise.

They frequently contrasted public statements with later recollections collected decades afterward.

Document 6

Emma Smith's Testimony

Importance

Among the most influential sources in RLDS history.

Emma repeatedly stated:

- Joseph Smith did not practice plural marriage.
- She never witnessed such activity.
- Accusations were false.

Restorationist Significance

Because Emma lived with Joseph Smith and remained close to events, RLDS writers regarded her testimony as exceptionally important.

Critics dispute her reliability.

The debate continues.

Document 7

Joseph Smith III Interviews and Investigations

Importance

Throughout his life:

Joseph Smith III

conducted extensive investigations concerning polygamy and succession.

Restorationist Significance

These investigations formed the backbone of RLDS historical arguments during the late nineteenth century.

Many interviews remain important historical sources.

Document 8

Testimony of Elijah Abel

Importance

Evidence concerning:

Elijah Abel

demonstrates that Black men held priesthood office during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

Restorationist Significance

Frequently cited against claims that Joseph Smith instituted racial priesthood restrictions.

Document 9

Joseph Smith's Presidential Platform (1844)

Importance

Joseph Smith's presidential campaign document.

Key Proposals

- Religious liberty
- Prison reform
- Federal reform
- Compensated emancipation

Restorationist Significance

Provides important evidence concerning Joseph Smith's mature political and social views.

Particularly relevant in discussions of race and slavery.

Document 10

Liberty Jail Letters

Importance

Written during Joseph Smith's imprisonment in Missouri.

Key Themes

- Perseverance
- Faith
- Suffering
- Divine guidance

Restorationist Significance

These documents reveal Joseph Smith's character during adversity and are often cited against fraud theories.

Document 11

The Nauvoo Expositor

Importance

A newspaper published by dissidents in 1844.

Significance

Its publication contributed directly to the crisis leading to Joseph Smith's death.

Restorationist Significance

The Expositor remains one of the most controversial documents in Restoration history because it contains accusations central to later debates.

Document 12

Testimonies of the Three Witnesses

Witnesses

- Oliver Cowdery
- David Whitmer
- Martin Harris

Importance

All three testified to seeing the plates and angelic manifestations.

Restorationist Significance

Their continued testimony, even after periods of estrangement, remains one of the strongest evidentiary arguments supporting Joseph Smith's claims.

Document 13

Testimonies of the Eight Witnesses

Importance

Eight additional witnesses testified that they physically handled the plates.

Restorationist Significance

Provides a second independent witness tradition alongside the Three Witnesses.

Document 14

Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision Account

Importance

The earliest surviving written account of Joseph Smith's First Vision.

Restorationist Significance

Demonstrates that Joseph was recounting visionary experiences years before later public retellings.

Document 15

Joseph Smith's 1838 First Vision Narrative

Importance

The most familiar account of the First Vision.

Restorationist Significance

Forms the canonical Restoration narrative regarding Joseph Smith's earliest revelation.

Document 16

Temple Lot Case Testimony

Importance

The Temple Lot litigation generated an enormous body of historical evidence.

Topics Covered

- Succession
- Polygamy
- Church history
- Nauvoo events

Restorationist Significance

Many RLDS historical arguments were presented under legal scrutiny during these proceedings.

Document 17

RLDS General Conference Resolutions

Importance

Official statements reflecting the beliefs and priorities of the Reorganized Church.

Restorationist Significance

Demonstrates continuity of major RLDS positions concerning:

- Polygamy
- Succession
- Joseph Smith
- Revelation

Document 18

RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144

Importance

Represents the classic body of RLDS continuing revelation.

Restorationist Significance

Provides the doctrinal foundation for historic RLDS theology.

Document 19

Kirtland Temple Accounts

Importance

Eyewitness reports concerning the dedication of the:

Kirtland Temple

Restorationist Significance

Often cited as evidence that powerful spiritual experiences accompanied the early Restoration.

Document 20

Carthage Jail Accounts

Importance

Eyewitness descriptions of the martyrdom.

Restorationist Significance

Central to understanding Joseph Smith's final days and the succession crisis that followed.

Summary of Key Documentary Themes

Taken together, these documents provide evidence concerning:

Joseph Smith's Character

- Liberty Jail letters
- Presidential platform
- Personal correspondence

Monogamy

- 1835 marriage statement
- Emma Smith testimony
- RLDS investigations

Race

- Elijah Abel documentation
- Presidential platform

Revelation

- Doctrine and Covenants
- First Vision accounts

Scripture

- Book of Mormon
- Witness testimonies

Succession

- Temple Lot evidence
- RLDS historical records

Conclusion

Primary documents do not eliminate historical disagreement.

They do provide a firmer foundation than speculation alone.

The historic RLDS defense of Joseph Smith relied heavily upon documentary evidence rather than mere tradition.

Whether one ultimately agrees with every conclusion, serious study of these sources remains essential for understanding the Restoration and the enduring debates surrounding Joseph Smith.

Appendix J

Bibliography and Sources

Primary Sources, RLDS Sources, LDS Sources, and Modern Scholarship

Introduction

No serious defense of Joseph Smith or examination of Restoration history can rely upon a single source or tradition.

The purpose of this bibliography is to identify major works that informed the development of Restoration thought and historical investigation. It includes sources from multiple perspectives:

- Primary historical documents
- Historic RLDS sources
- Community of Christ sources
- LDS sources
- Independent scholarship
- Critical scholarship
- Ancient Christian sources relevant to Restoration theology

A mature understanding of Joseph Smith requires engagement with evidence from all sides.

Part I

Primary Historical Sources

Joseph Smith Papers

The Joseph Smith Papers Project

The most important documentary collection relating to Joseph Smith.

Includes:

- Letters
- Journals
- Revelations
- Legal records
- Historical documents

Essential for serious research.

History of the Church

Compiled from historical materials associated with Joseph Smith and early church records.

Historically influential though modern researchers often compare it with original manuscripts.

Doctrine and Covenants

Doctrine and Covenants

Essential source for understanding Restoration theology and continuing revelation.

The Book of Mormon

Book of Mormon

Primary Restoration scripture.

Central to every branch of the movement.

The Holy Bible

Foundation of Restoration theology.

The Restoration consistently interpreted itself as part of the biblical narrative.

Part II

Historic RLDS Sources

The Saints' Herald

Official RLDS publication for many decades.

Contains:

- Historical articles
- Doctrinal discussions
- Mission reports
- Responses to Utah Mormonism

One of the most important sources for understanding historic RLDS thought.

The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III

Joseph Smith III

Important for understanding:

- Succession
- Polygamy controversies
- RLDS identity

Emma Smith Interviews

Collected testimonies of:

Emma Hale Smith

Essential to the historic RLDS defense against accusations of polygamy.

The Temple Lot Case Record

One of the largest collections of historical testimony concerning early Restoration history.

Valuable for:

- Succession
- Polygamy
- Nauvoo events

RLDS Doctrine and Covenants Through Section 144

The core doctrinal collection of historic RLDS theology.

Part III

Community of Christ Sources

Community of Christ Official Website

Official denominational resource.

Contains:

- Current theology
- Historical materials
- Scripture resources
- Peace and justice initiatives

Exploring Community of Christ

Official educational materials explaining modern Community of Christ beliefs and practices.

Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants

Includes revelations received after the historic RLDS period.

Useful for understanding modern developments.

Part IV

LDS Sources

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Official Website

Official LDS resource.

Provides:

- Historical essays
- Scripture resources
- Church history materials

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith

Historically influential compilation of Joseph Smith's teachings.

Important though researchers often compare quotations with original sources.

B. H. Roberts

B. H. Roberts

Major LDS historian and defender of the Restoration.

Important works include:

- New Witnesses for God
- Comprehensive History of the Church

James E. Talmage

James E. Talmage

Important for understanding classical LDS theology.

Part V

Independent Scholarship

Richard Lyman Bushman

Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

Widely regarded as one of the finest modern biographies of Joseph Smith.

Sympathetic but academically rigorous.

Essential reading.

Dan Vogel

Provides critical interpretations of Joseph Smith while maintaining scholarly standards.

Important for understanding skeptical perspectives.

Jan Shipps

One of the most respected non-Mormon historians of the Restoration.

Her work is invaluable for contextual understanding.

Grant H. Palmer

Critical perspective.

Frequently cited by critics of Joseph Smith.

Useful for understanding opposing arguments.

Fawn M. Brodie

No Man Knows My History

Historically influential critical biography.

Although controversial, it remains important to engage.

Part VI

Book of Abraham Scholarship

John Gee

Defender of various Book of Abraham theories.

Kerry Muhlestein

Important modern scholar on Book of Abraham issues.

Robert K. Ritner

Prominent critical voice regarding the Book of Abraham.

Book of Abraham Essays

Both apologetic and critical works should be consulted for balanced evaluation.

Part VII

Early Christianity and Theosis

These works are particularly valuable for readers interested in the relationship between Joseph Smith's later teachings and historic Christianity.

Athanasius of Alexandria

On the Incarnation

Classic source concerning divine-human participation.

Irenaeus

Against Heresies

Important source for early Christian theology.

Gregory of Nyssa

Major contributor to Christian mystical theology.

Maximus the Confessor

Important source concerning theosis and cosmic redemption.

Origen

Significant for discussions of universal restoration and spiritual interpretation.

Part VIII

Universal Reconciliation and Cosmic Restoration

Gregory of Nyssa

Frequently cited in discussions of universal restoration.

Origen

Important though controversial source.

Modern Studies of Christian Universalism

Useful for connecting Restoration theology with broader traditions of cosmic redemption.

Part IX

Restoration Branch Sources

Various independent Restoration Branch publications preserve:

- Historic RLDS theology
- Section 144 Restorationism
- Anti-polygamy scholarship
- Traditional Restoration apologetics

These materials remain important for understanding contemporary historic RLDS perspectives.

Recommended Reading Path

For newcomers:

1. Bible

2. Book of Mormon

3. Doctrine and Covenants

4. Joseph Smith Papers

5. Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

6. RLDS historical materials

7. Temple Lot records

8. Early Christian writings on theosis

This sequence provides a balanced foundation.

Final Reflection

The study of Joseph Smith requires intellectual honesty.

Supportive sources alone are insufficient.

Critical sources alone are insufficient.

A mature approach examines evidence from every side.

The Restoration emerged from real history.

Consequently, understanding it requires engagement with both faith and scholarship.

The goal is not merely defending a position.

The goal is discovering truth.

Appendix K

Glossary of Restoration Terms

A Dictionary of Key Concepts, Offices, and Doctrines

Introduction

The Restoration movement developed a rich vocabulary that draws from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and early Christian tradition. Some terms are shared with broader Christianity. Others possess distinctive meanings within Restoration history.

This glossary provides concise definitions from a historic Restorationist perspective informed by the RLDS tradition.

A

Aaronic Priesthood

The priesthood associated with:

- Baptism
- Preparation
- Service

Traditionally includes offices such as:

- Deacon
- Teacher
- Priest

Named after Aaron of the Old Testament.

Agency

The God-given capacity to choose.

Human beings are morally responsible because they possess agency.

Freedom is a central principle of Restoration theology.

Apostle

A special minister called to witness of Jesus Christ and proclaim the gospel.

In the Restoration tradition, apostles often possess missionary responsibilities extending beyond local congregations.

Apostasy

A falling away from truth.

The Restoration traditionally taught that Christianity experienced a Great Apostasy after the apostolic age, making restoration necessary.

B

Baptism

An ordinance symbolizing repentance, covenant, and discipleship.

The Restoration generally practices baptism by immersion.

Bishop

A priesthood office associated with stewardship, administration, and care for temporal affairs.

Book of Mormon

Book of Mormon

A sacred text translated and published by Joseph Smith in 1830.

Regarded as another witness of Jesus Christ.

C

Calling

A responsibility or ministry given by God.

Callings may be formal or informal.

Canon

The collection of authoritative scripture recognized by a religious community.

The Restoration affirms an open canon because revelation may continue.

Christ

The Messiah, Savior, and Lord.

Jesus Christ stands at the center of all authentic Restoration theology.

Consecration

The dedication of one's life and resources to God.

Closely associated with stewardship and Zion.

Covenant

A sacred relationship between God and humanity.

The Restoration frequently emphasizes covenant discipleship.

D

Deacon

An Aaronic Priesthood office emphasizing service and practical ministry.

Doctrine and Covenants

Doctrine and Covenants

A collection of revelations given through Joseph Smith and later prophetic leaders.

A central scripture of the Restoration.

E

Elder

A Melchizedek Priesthood office responsible for preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry.

Endowment

A term associated with spiritual empowerment.

Historically interpreted in various ways across Restoration traditions.

Evangelist

A priesthood office historically associated with patriarchal blessing and spiritual encouragement.

In historic RLDS usage, Evangelist eventually replaced the title Patriarch.

F

Faith

Trust in God and confidence in divine promises.

The first principle of the gospel.

First Presidency

The chief leadership body of the church.

Traditionally consists of a president and counselors.

First Vision

Joseph Smith's foundational visionary experience in which he reported seeing God the Father and Jesus Christ.

G

Gathering

The process of assembling God's covenant people.

Historically associated with Zion.

Gifts of the Spirit

Divine manifestations such as:

- Healing
- Prophecy
- Wisdom
- Discernment
- Tongues

The Restoration affirms their continued availability.

Great Apostasy

The belief that essential truths and authority were lost after the apostolic age, creating the need for restoration.

H

High Priest

A Melchizedek Priesthood office associated with leadership and spiritual oversight.

Holy Spirit

The divine presence active in revelation, sanctification, and guidance.

I

Independence

Independence

Historically regarded as a central location in Restoration Zion theology.

Israel

God's covenant people.

The Restoration frequently speaks of the gathering and restoration of Israel.

J

Judgment

God's perfect evaluation of all things.

Judgment combines justice, truth, and mercy.

K

Kingdom of God

God's reign manifested in human lives and communities.

Closely related to Zion.

King Follett Discourse

A sermon delivered by Joseph Smith in 1844 concerning:

- The nature of God
- Human destiny
- Eternal life

One of the most influential sermons in Restoration history.

L

Lamanites

A people described in the Book of Mormon.

Historically understood in multiple ways by different Restoration traditions.

Liberty Jail

Liberty Jail

Site of Joseph Smith's imprisonment in 1838–1839.

Associated with important revelations and letters.

M

Melchizedek Priesthood

The higher priesthood associated with spiritual leadership and ministry.

Includes offices such as:

- Elder
- High Priest
- Apostle

Mission

The calling to proclaim the gospel and serve humanity.

A central concern of the Restoration.

Moroni

Moroni

The heavenly messenger who, according to Joseph Smith, directed him to the Book of Mormon plates.

N

Nauvoo

Nauvoo

The principal gathering place of the Saints from 1839–1844.

O

Ordinance

A sacred act performed within the life of the church.

Examples include:

- Baptism
- Confirmation
- Ordination

P

Patriarch

Historically a priesthood office associated with blessing and spiritual counsel.

In the RLDS tradition, the title Evangelist largely replaced Patriarch.

Priest

An Aaronic Priesthood office associated with preaching, teaching, and sacramental ministry.

Priesthood

Sacred authority and responsibility for ministry within the church.

The purpose of priesthood is service rather than domination.

Prophet

One called by God to proclaim truth and provide spiritual guidance.

Joseph Smith is regarded by believers as a prophet of the Restoration.

Q

Quorum

A body of priesthood members organized for governance and ministry.

R

Reconciliation

The healing of broken relationships.

A major theme in both historic RLDS theology and modern Community of Christ teaching.

Redemption

Deliverance from sin and alienation through Jesus Christ.

Restoration

The renewal of divine truth, authority, and covenant life through the ministry of Joseph Smith.

Revelation

Communication from God.

The Restoration teaches that revelation continues.

S

Sacrament

The ordinance commemorating Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

Comparable to Communion or the Lord's Supper.

Seventy

A priesthood office traditionally associated with missionary ministry.

Stewardship

Responsible care of resources entrusted by God.

A major principle in Restoration ethics.

T

Temple

A sacred space dedicated to worship and divine purposes.

Examples include:

- Kirtland Temple
- Independence Temple

Theosis

Participation in the life of God through Christ.

The doctrine that humanity is called to transformation and communion with God.

Often compared with Eastern Christian teachings on deification.

U

Universal Reconciliation

The belief that God's ultimate purposes involve the restoration and reconciliation of creation.

Historically associated with certain streams of Christian thought.

V

Vision

A spiritual experience involving divine revelation.

The First Vision is the most famous example within Restoration history.

W

Witness

One who testifies concerning spiritual truth.

The Three Witnesses and Eight Witnesses occupy an important place in Restoration history.

Z

Zion

The central social vision of the Restoration.

Zion is:

- The pure in heart.
- A covenant community.
- A manifestation of God's Kingdom.
- A future hope.

The building of Zion remains one of the highest aspirations of the Restoration.

Concluding Definition

Restorationist

A Restorationist is one who believes that God acted through Joseph Smith to renew aspects of ancient Christianity while continuing to call humanity toward Christ, revelation, Zion, and the Kingdom of God.

Such a person may belong to various Restoration traditions but remains committed to the core conviction that God's work of restoration continues.

Appendix L

The Restorationist Manifesto

A Declaration for the Future of the Restoration

Introduction

The Restoration began with a question.

A young man entered a grove of trees seeking wisdom from God.

He lived in an age of religious confusion, competing claims, and spiritual uncertainty.

Yet the questions that troubled him have not disappeared.

They remain with us.

Can God still speak?

Can revelation continue?

Can Christianity be renewed?

Can humanity become more than it presently is?

Can the Kingdom of God become a living reality?

The Restoration emerged as one answer to those questions.

This manifesto is offered as a declaration of what a Christ-centered Restorationism may look like in the present age.

It is not intended to replace scripture.

It is not intended to create a new creed.

It is intended to summarize the principles that have emerged throughout this volume.

I

We Affirm Jesus Christ

The Restoration does not exist for its own sake.

It exists because of Jesus Christ.

Christ is:

- Savior.

- Redeemer.
- Lord.
- Teacher.
- Revealer of God.

Every revelation, scripture, ordinance, ministry, and doctrine must ultimately point toward Him.

Whenever the Restoration forgets Christ, it forgets itself.

Whenever it remembers Christ, it remembers its purpose.

II

We Affirm Continuing Revelation

We reject the idea that God has fallen silent.

The God who spoke to:

- Abraham
- Moses
- Isaiah
- Peter
- John

still speaks.

The heavens remain open.

The Holy Spirit remains active.

Revelation did not cease with the closing of the biblical canon.

The divine-human conversation continues.

Yet revelation must always be tested by:

- Truth
- Charity
- Wisdom
- Christ-centeredness

Not every claimed revelation is genuine.

But genuine revelation remains possible.

III

We Affirm the Restoration

We believe God acted through:

Joseph Smith Jr.

to restore important truths and practices.

This does not require believing Joseph Smith was infallible.

It requires recognizing that God often works through imperfect people.

The Restoration is not the worship of Joseph Smith.

The Restoration is the renewal of divine calling.

IV

We Reject the Cult of Personality

No prophet is the center of the gospel.

Not Joseph Smith.

Not Brigham Young.

Not any later leader.

The church belongs to Christ alone.

Leaders serve.

They do not replace the Savior.

History demonstrates the danger of elevating personalities above principles.

The future of the Restoration depends upon remembering this lesson.

V

We Affirm the Book of Mormon

We receive the:

Book of Mormon

as another witness of Jesus Christ.

Its central message is not race.

Its central message is not politics.

Its central message is Christ.

The book calls humanity to:

- Faith
- Repentance
- Charity
- Hope

- Covenant discipleship

Its enduring value rests in that witness.

VI

We Reject Racism

We affirm the sacred worth of every human being.

All people bear the image of God.

No race is superior.

No ethnicity is inferior.

No nation possesses exclusive access to divine favor.

The gospel belongs to all.

The Restoration belongs to all.

We therefore reject:

- Racism
- Ethnic supremacy
- Nationalistic idolatry

The future Zion cannot be built upon prejudice.

VII

We Reject Polygamy

We affirm monogamous marriage as the historic Christian ideal.

Following the historic RLDS tradition, we reject the claim that plural marriage formed part of the original gospel restored through Joseph Smith.

Whatever debates historians continue to pursue, our vision of the future is rooted in covenantal monogamy, fidelity, and mutual love.

VIII

We Affirm Zion

Zion is not merely a place.

Zion is a people.

Zion is a way of life.

Zion exists wherever:

- Justice is practiced.
- Compassion is shown.
- Truth is honored.
- Peace is pursued.

The building of Zion remains the central social mission of the Restoration.

IX

We Affirm Stewardship

Everything ultimately belongs to God.

Human beings are caretakers rather than owners.

We therefore affirm responsible stewardship of:

- Wealth
- Property
- Time
- Talents

- Creation itself

A Zion people cannot be indifferent to suffering, poverty, or exploitation.

X

We Affirm Peace

The Kingdom of God is not built through coercion.

Violence may sometimes appear powerful.

Yet Christ revealed a higher way.

The Restoration must increasingly become a force for:

- Peace
- Reconciliation
- Healing
- Cooperation

The future belongs not to domination but to service.

XI

We Affirm Religious Freedom

Truth requires freedom.

Faith requires freedom.

Conscience requires freedom.

We therefore affirm the right of every person to worship according to conscience.

Religious liberty is not merely a political principle.

It is a spiritual necessity.

No authentic faith can be produced through force.

XII

We Affirm the Sacred Search for Truth

Truth should never fear investigation.

Questions are not enemies of faith.

Honest inquiry strengthens understanding.

The Restoration began with a question.

It should therefore welcome questions.

We encourage:

- Scholarship
- Study
- Historical investigation
- Scientific discovery

All truth ultimately belongs to God.

XIII

We Affirm the Divine Destiny of Humanity

Human beings were not created merely to survive.

They were created for transformation.

Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, humanity is called into deeper participation in divine life.

The purpose of salvation is not merely escape from punishment.

The purpose of salvation is communion with God.

Theosis, sanctification, glorification—whatever language is used—the goal is the same:

Union with divine love.

XIV

We Affirm Hope

The Restoration is ultimately a message of hope.

Hope that:

- God still speaks.
- Humanity can change.
- Communities can heal.
- Zion can be built.
- Creation can be restored.

Hope stands at the center of the gospel.

Without hope, faith becomes fear.

Without hope, religion becomes control.

Without hope, Zion becomes impossible.

XV

We Look Toward the Restoration of All Things

History is not meaningless.

Creation is not abandoned.

God's purposes are not defeated.

The Kingdom advances.

The work continues.

The final victory belongs to Christ.

We therefore live not in despair but in expectation.

We look toward the reconciliation of all things under the reign of God.

Final Declaration

We stand within the stream of the Restoration.

We honor the witness of:

- The Bible.
- The Book of Mormon.
- The Doctrine and Covenants.
- The faithful Saints of every generation.

We honor Joseph Smith without worshiping him.

We seek Zion without coercion.

We pursue revelation without fanaticism.

We embrace faith without abandoning reason.

We confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

We reject racism.

We reject polygamy.

We affirm continuing revelation.

We affirm the sacred worth of all people.

We dedicate ourselves to the building of Zion and the service of humanity.

And we look forward to the day when:

> Truth shall triumph over falsehood,
>
> Mercy shall overcome cruelty,
>
> Love shall conquer fear,
>
> Zion shall fill the earth,
>
> And God shall be all in all.

Amen.

End of Volume

Joseph Smith on Trial: A Restorationist Defense of the Prophet, the Book of Mormon, and the Reorganized Tradition

Including:

- 26 Chapters
- 12 Appendices (A–L)
- RLDS-focused apologetics
- Defense of Joseph Smith
- Defense of the Book of Mormon

- Discussion of the Book of Abraham
- Discussion of the King Follett Discourse
- Anti-polygamy arguments
- Anti-racist arguments
- Restorationist confession and manifesto
- Historical timelines, glossary, bibliography, and reference materials

Complete.

Sources and References

For *Joseph Smith on Trial: A Restorationist Defense of the Prophet, the Book of Mormon, and the Reorganized Tradition*

Introduction

This volume draws upon four major categories of sources:

1. **Primary Restoration Documents**
2. **Historic RLDS / Reorganized Church Sources**
3. **LDS and Independent Historical Scholarship**
4. **Ancient Christian Sources Relevant to Restoration Theology**

Because this book presents a specifically Restorationist and historic RLDS interpretation of Joseph Smith, readers are encouraged to consult both supportive and critical sources directly.

Part I

Primary Sources

Scriptures

Holy Bible

Primary scriptural foundation of the Restoration.

Recommended editions:

- King James Version
- New Revised Standard Version
- Revised Authorized Version (RLDS tradition)

Book of Mormon

1830 Edition

RLDS Authorized Edition

Herald House Editions

Used extensively for:

- Theology
- Race discussions
- Zion
- Christology

- Restoration claims

Doctrine and Covenants

1835 Edition

RLDS Editions through Section 144

Used extensively for:

- Revelation
- Priesthood
- Church governance
- Zion
- Stewardship

Joseph Smith Primary Documents

The Joseph Smith Papers Project

The single most important documentary source.

Consulted for:

- First Vision accounts
- Correspondence
- Journals
- Revelations
- Legal records
- Historical narratives

History of the Church

Edited by:
B. H. Roberts

Important historical compilation.

Used cautiously alongside original manuscripts.

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith

Compiled by:
Joseph Fielding Smith

Major source for Joseph Smith quotations.

The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith

Edited by:
Dean C. Jessee

Important documentary collection.

Part II

RLDS Sources

Official Publications

Saints' Herald

Primary RLDS periodical.

Essential for understanding:

- Historic RLDS doctrine
- Anti-polygamy arguments
- Succession claims
- Joseph Smith defenses

The True Latter Day Saints' Herald

Important nineteenth-century RLDS publication.

RLDS General Conference Reports

Used for:

- Official church positions
- Revelation
- Ecclesiology
- Historical developments

Joseph Smith III

Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III

By:
Joseph Smith III

Important source regarding:

- Succession
- Polygamy
- RLDS identity

Various Joseph Smith III Interviews and Correspondence

Particularly important regarding:

- Emma Smith
- Plural marriage
- Historical investigations

Emma Smith Sources

Emma Smith Interview (1879)

Published in the Saints' Herald.

Frequently cited by RLDS historians.

History of Joseph Smith by His Mother

By:
Lucy Mack Smith

Valuable family source.

Part III

Temple Lot and Documentary Evidence

Temple Lot Case Record

Official legal proceedings.

Important for:

- Polygamy testimony
- Succession issues
- Early church history

Contains testimony from:

- RLDS witnesses
- LDS witnesses
- Independent witnesses

Early Church Newspapers

Including:

- Evening and Morning Star

- Times and Seasons
- Nauvoo Neighbor
- Elders' Journal

Important primary documents.

Part IV

Major RLDS Historians

Heman C. Smith

History of the Reorganized Church

One of the foundational RLDS histories.

F. Henry Edwards

Fundamentals

The Story of the Church

Important twentieth-century RLDS theology.

Richard P. Howard

Restoration Scriptures

Church Through the Years

Perhaps the most influential RLDS historian of the twentieth century.

Alma R. Blair

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

Important scholarly treatment.

Part V

LDS Historical Scholarship

Richard Lyman Bushman

Richard Lyman Bushman

Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

One of the most respected modern biographies.

Used extensively for historical context.

B. H. Roberts

New Witnesses for God

Comprehensive History of the Church

Important apologetic and historical works.

Leonard J. Arrington

Leonard J. Arrington

Brigham Young: American Moses

Used primarily for Utah-era history.

James B. Allen

Studies in Mormon History

Useful historical analysis.

Part VI

Independent and Critical Historians

Jan Shipps

Jan Shipps

Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition

Essential non-Mormon scholarship.

Dan Vogel

Dan Vogel

Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet

Important skeptical perspective.

Fawn M. Brodie

Fawn M. Brodie

No Man Knows My History

Historically influential critical biography.

D. Michael Quinn

D. Michael Quinn

Important for discussions of:

- Nauvoo
- Polygamy
- Early Mormonism

Part VII

Book of Mormon Scholarship

Hugh Nibley

Hugh Nibley

Major defender of Book of Mormon antiquity.

John L. Sorenson

John L. Sorenson

An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon

Blake T. Ostler

Blake T. Ostler

Important theological scholarship.

Grant Hardy

Grant Hardy

Understanding the Book of Mormon

Valuable literary analysis.

Part VIII

Book of Abraham Sources

John Gee

John Gee

Defensive scholarship.

Kerry Muhlestein

Kerry Muhlestein

Book of Abraham studies.

Robert K. Ritner

Robert K. Ritner

Critical Egyptological perspective.

Brian M. Hauglid

Brian M. Hauglid

Important modern scholarship.

Part IX

King Follett Discourse Sources

The King Follett Sermon

Compiled from notes taken by:

- Willard Richards
- Wilford Woodruff
- Thomas Bullock
- William Clayton

Primary source.

Stan Larson

The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text

Important scholarly reconstruction.

Part X

Early Christianity and Theosis

Used heavily in chapters discussing:

- King Follett
- Human destiny
- Divine participation

Irenaeus

Against Heresies

Athanasius of Alexandria

On the Incarnation

Gregory of Nyssa

On the Soul and Resurrection

Maximus the Confessor

Ambigua

Origen

On First Principles

Part XI

Universal Restoration Sources

These influenced the theological framing of redemption and cosmic restoration.

Origen

On First Principles

Gregory of Nyssa

Various works concerning ultimate restoration.

Modern Universalist Scholarship

The Evangelical Universalist

By:
Robin Parry

That All Shall Be Saved

By:
David Bentley Hart

Part XII

Community of Christ Sources

[Community of Christ Official Website]

Used for:

- Historical developments
- Current positions
- Contemporary theology

Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants

Used when discussing developments beyond Section 144.

Part XIII

Restoration Branch Sources

Various Restoration Branch publications, newsletters, conference materials, and independent Restorationist writings were consulted for:

- Section 144 Restorationism
- Anti-polygamy arguments
- Historic RLDS doctrine
- Contemporary Restoration thought

Source Notes on Specific Chapters

Chapters 1–8

Primarily:

- Joseph Smith Papers
- Book of Mormon
- History of the Church
- RLDS historical works

Chapters 9–14

Primarily:

- Temple Lot Case
- Emma Smith testimony

- Joseph Smith III investigations
- Saints' Herald

Chapters 15–18

Primarily:

- Book of Abraham scholarship
- Egyptological studies
- RLDS discussions

Chapters 19–20

Primarily:

- King Follett sources
- Early Christian theology
- Patristic writings

Chapters 21–24

Primarily:

- Elijah Abel documentation
- Joseph Smith presidential platform
- RLDS and LDS race histories

Chapters 25–26

Primarily:

- Synthetic historical analysis
- RLDS theology
- Restorationist interpretation

Final Source Statement

This book intentionally draws from:

- Believing sources
- Skeptical sources
- RLDS sources
- LDS sources
- Independent academic sources
- Ancient Christian sources

The goal has not been merely to defend Joseph Smith but to present the strongest historic Restorationist case while remaining engaged with the broader historical conversation.

Readers are encouraged to consult primary documents directly, examine competing interpretations honestly, and continue the search for truth wherever it may lead.